

NOVEL

7

THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY

WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi



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**“Do you know
about me?”**

Tap. Tap. Her shoes struck the ground as she slowly walked toward them. Loren couldn't reply. He knew about her, sure, but this was the first time he'd ever gotten a proper look at her. The impact of her showmanship knocked his words from his mouth.

**“She's the bloody
Infernal Edge.”**

Mammon

Dark god of greed.
He desires everything
in the world and will
stop at nothing to
get it.

Magical light revealed the
dark god's face.

He was short. He wouldn't
even stand as tall as Loren's
navel, and his hair was
a curly brown mess that
poked up sharply here and
there. Although his purple
eyes—a trait shared by evil
gods—looked down on
Loren condescendingly,
he was as Loren had
surmised from the voice.
A young boy.

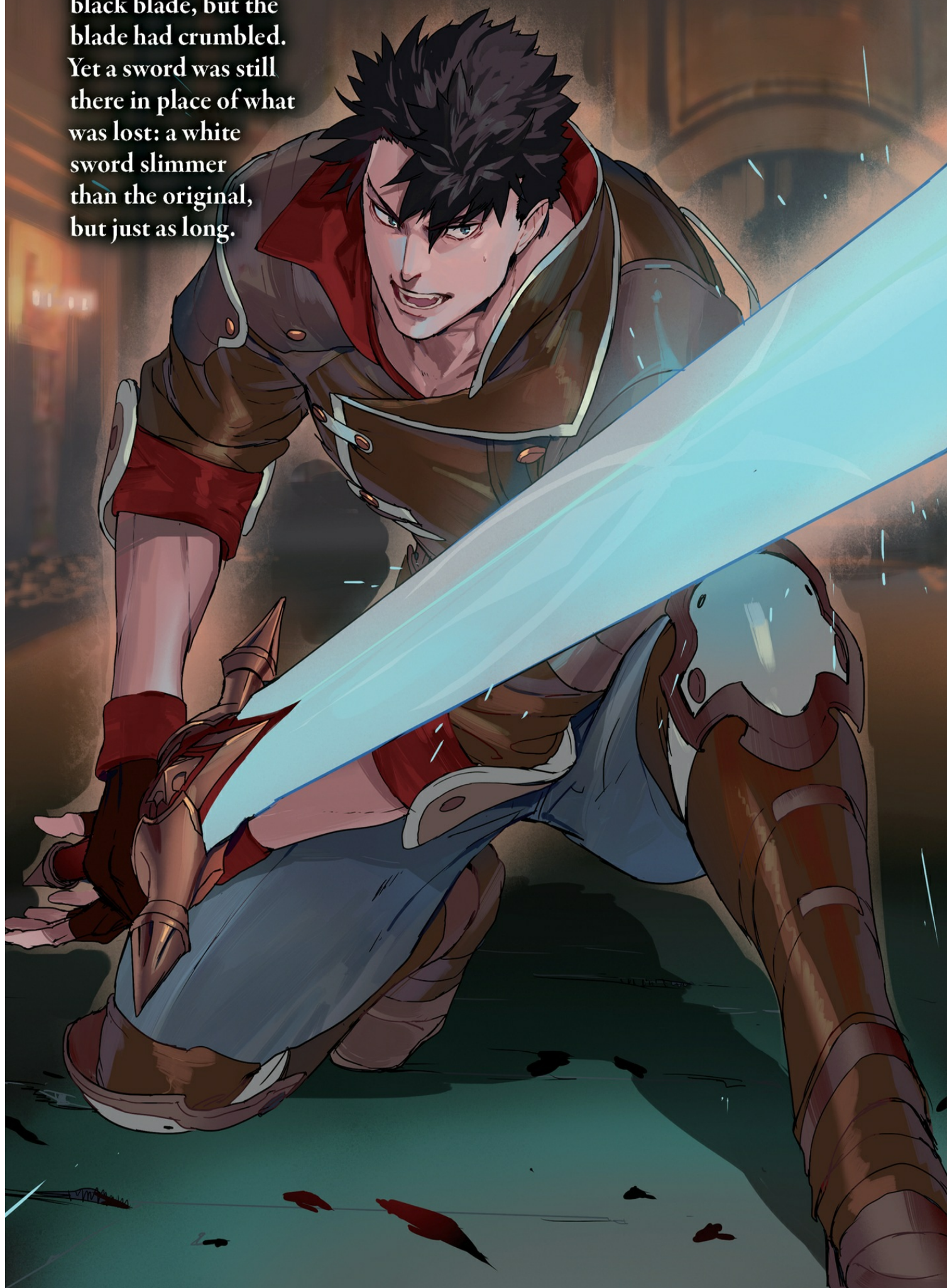
"I don't wanna know, but... Are those
the naked woman's undergarments?"

"Do you want them? Of course, you'd want
them, mister. But you can't have them.
I'm not called greed for nothing."

"Loren, that there is
Mammon Avaritia.
They called him the
dark god of greed."



It was a sword with a
black blade, but the
blade had crumbled.
Yet a sword was still
there in place of what
was lost: a white
sword slimmer
than the original,
but just as long.



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Seven Seas Entertainment

KUITSUME YOHEI NO GENSO KITAN Volume 7

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Illustrations by peroshi

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Prologue:

From Start to Registration

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—battalions of two armies, wiped out.

Although he certainly didn't want to hear about it, Loren had no way to stop the whispers from reaching his ears. As he sat in a corner of the guild's bar, he tried to tune out the chatter of nearby adventuring parties.

Apparently, a number of soldiers from the kingdoms of Waargenberg and Schoenbryn, caught in a skirmish, had simply vanished. The battle hadn't been particularly intense and other casualties were remarkably low. One division deserting from one army might not raise eyebrows, but chunks of both armies had been, it seemed, spirited away. This stirred up a fair bit of interest among the adventurers.

"How hah hoo hehon hith, I heher hohin hi hath..."

"Swallow first! Swallow before you speak!"

Gula, across from him at the table, apparently had something to say, but everything shoved in her mouth made her totally incomprehensible to Loren. In each hand she clenched an unseasoned, grilled drumstick.

In the time it took Gula to plow through the rest of her meat, the priest next to Loren spoke up.

"I can make a guess as to what happened," she said, swishing around the ale in her cup.

Loren cut her off. "I don't want to hear it. You don't have to spell it out."

Truthfully, Loren could put the pieces together as well. After all, it had happened on their last quest. To think it had all started when they took up a job to deliver supplies to a village—all at the behest of an adventurer called Claes.

They went through a lot of trouble, and at the end of it all, they stumbled across the dark god of lust, Luxuria. Now there was a man Loren didn't want to think about. The dark god's influence lured away residents of the nearby

villages as well as the soldiers fighting nearby; that same power compelled them to hold a sort of bacchanal he hesitated to put into words.

The situation was resolved one way or another, and at the end of it, Gula began following them around with her platinum blonde hair and her penchant for eating drumsticks, bone and all.

Although Gula was also a dark god—the dark god of gluttony, to be exact—she tagged along all the way to the town of Kaffa out of nothing more than curiosity.

Once Gula had finally masticated the food in her mouth and swallowed, she plainly stated, “Hey, when you’ve got your blade deep in a guy one day, you don’t want to have to stab him the next, right?”

Loren and Lapis exchanged a dark look.

Then Loren turned to Gula and grumbled, “I said I didn’t want to hear it.”

“You said it to Lapis, not me,” she retorted haughtily.

“Woman, who do you think is paying for that meat you’re spilling all over the place?”

Having been sealed for a great many years, Gula naturally wasn’t carrying around a fortune in coin. Then again, it didn’t seem she’d been in the habit of paying her bills in the first place.

Of course, Loren wound up burdened with her living expenses in Kaffa, and this amounted to a ridiculous sum. Ignoring the inn for a second, Gula ate enough to bring honor to her title of “dark god of gluttony.” Just watching her was enough to invoke heartburn and kill his own appetite.

If she wasn’t properly managed, a visit from Gula was enough to put a restaurant out of business for the day. She would plow through their entire stock and still complain at the end of it.

What’s more, she stubbornly insisted on eating three square meals a day. Paying for all this was no joke.

“All these expenses are going to cost me gold coins.”

“Ah—ha ha ha ha. I guess I’m a bit peckish, what with being asleep for so

long. You humans make way too many tasty things.”

I guess I can't blame her, Loren thought for just a moment.

A bit ago, Loren took a job at a certain adventurer-rearing school where a dark god of sloth had been sealed. If the story he heard back then was true, Gula had been sealed away for hundreds of years; presumably, she hadn't enjoyed a bite to eat the entire time.

After she was unsealed, she ate what she could hunt in the wilderness, but it wasn't likely she hadn't found any good homecooking. When Loren thought of it like that, he felt a pang of pity. On top of that, Loren was the sort of soft touch who couldn't be too hard on her.

“I'll earn my keep, okay?” Gula said. “Just be patient.”

“That's what we're here for today, after all.”

Gula had nothing to prove her identity—or at least, nothing that would matter in human towns. Loren had no idea how she got into Kaffa in the first place, but he decided not to think about it. In any case, letting her run around undocumented would certainly bring trouble down the line.

They had come to the guild to remedy this—to register her as an adventurer and a member of Loren's party.

Unfortunately, her stomach didn't last the trip to the reception desk; they had no choice but to visit the bar first. Loren and Lapis sipped their ales while Gula somehow ordered an enormous plate of chicken scraps.

“Still, if we register her, will she have to start at copper? Sounds like a bad joke to me.”

“I agree with you there, but there's no possible way we could explain her circumstances and hope to start her off any higher.”

With the scope of her power, there was no possible way the dark god Gula was copper rank. She was silver, at the very least, and it wouldn't be shocking if she landed even higher than that.

Yet it was stupidly optimistic to think no ill would come of telling the guild, “Hey, this is a dark god.” They had met by coincidence, coincidentally become

allies, and, as far as anyone else was concerned, Gula was nothing more than a normal adventurer.

“Wait, didn’t we already report her to the guild? You know, that one time?”

Lapis and Loren had first met Gula in a fairy settlement, and the power of gluttony had turned the fairies and their chief feral with hunger. They had reported the incident to the guild, for what it was worth, and the guild had surely passed the information to the Kingdom of Waargenberg.

“You sure there won’t be a panic if we register her under the name Gula?”

“Yes, well that’s... No, it’s not like she’s the only Gula out there.”

Loren didn’t think it was a particularly rare name, but it wasn’t a common one either. The idea of registering her under a false name did occur to him, but Gula was immediately opposed.

“Names are important, bud. I’m Gluttony because I’m Gula, that’s just how it works. If I called myself something else...”

“What happens then?”

If that meant she’d be unable to use her gluttony powers anymore, then that sounded like a pretty tidy solution to Loren’s woes. But when was he ever so lucky? Gula dashed all his hopes.

“I wouldn’t be able to restrain my gluttony powers anymore,” she told him.

“So we’ll have to go with your real name... Let’s pray you don’t get found out.”

When Gula had first been unsealed, she assimilated with the chieftain of the fairies. In that form, her powers had been out of her control, and all surrounding animals developed a vicious appetite with horrible personalities to match.

Imagine that sort of incident in the middle of Kaffa—how many casualties would result? Loren doubted anyone would be able to clean up that mess.

After weighing his options, he decided they were better off using her real name. If anyone realized who she was, the party would bluff their way through it somehow or another.

“Well, I doubt anyone will catch on as long as we don’t make a big deal out of it,” Lapis said, dismissing Loren’s anxieties. She took a few delicate sips of her ale before continuing, “It’s not like the adventurers’ guild has some magic tool to dig into a registrant’s background. They might find the name a little strange, but that should be the end of it. I mean, they still haven’t figured me out yet.”

That last bit did lend a strange amount of credibility to her statement.

Though Lapis dressed as a priest and acted like an ordinary human, she was actually a demon hailing from a mountainous region at the heart of the continent. Her race’s base abilities far exceeded those of mankind.

Lapis had entered human society—semi-evicted by her own parents—to experience the world. To conceal her demon powers, her eyes, arms, and legs were lopped off and hidden all across the human world. She had experienced quite a traumatic departure indeed.

Of her severed parts, Lapis had regained her arms over the course of her travels with Loren. As she was now, she possessed far more of her demonic powers than when she first met Loren, but the guild had still yet to cast even a shadow of doubt upon her.

In the same vein, Loren wasn’t exactly normal either. During a past quest, a girl who became a Lifeless King—the highest form of undead—began to inhabit his astral body. Strictly speaking, he was quite the shady figure himself.

The guild didn’t seem to have caught wise. With that in mind, Loren had the feeling Gula would manage somehow or another.

“Well, you might be right. Ah, Gula. Do something about the eyes.”

As with the other dark gods he’d met, her skin, hair, and body weren’t particularly strange. There was just one major thing setting her apart from humans. It was, in fact, the same thing that gave demons away, and Loren had to wonder if the two were related. Lapis wouldn’t offer any information on the matter, and Gula seemed completely oblivious.

“Something? What about them.”

“The color, the damn color. Can’t you change it?”

“Mr. Loren. Please take another good look at her eyes.”

He'd kept his gaze averted from the mess as she dug through the chicken and crunched through all the bones, but now he looked her straight in the eye.

She accepted his stare blankly, but after locking gazes for a long minute, she placed her hands to her cheeks and began to wriggle. “Oh my, no need to look at me like that.”

Loren silently reached for the sword on his back.

At his practiced movement, Gula threw herself over the table in a panic, her expression turning serious.

“Just messing with you. Hey, look closer.”

Releasing the hilt, Loren looked at Gula's eyes once more.

What separated dark gods and demons from humans were eyes of an impossible purple hue. However, now that he had a good look at them, Gula's eyes were not the purple he remembered them to be. They appeared a lovely, clear red.

“How'd you manage that?”

“Oh, this? Just omit a little blue, and you're left with a nice shade o' red.”

“You're making it sound like paint or something...”

“Well, it ain't too different, is it?”

She made it sound simple, but there was no way eye color could be changed so easily.

Loren wondered if this was another facet of her dark god powers. But it wasn't like pondering the matter would get him any closer to understanding. For the time being, there was no need to worry about her eye color, so he decided to be optimistic.

Chapter 1:

A Quarrel to Forget

“OH, MR. LOREN. What brings you here today?”

The woman sitting at the adventurers’ guild desk was a receptionist he’d become acquainted with: Ivy. Dealing with someone who was actually capable at her job gave Loren a bad feeling, but he couldn’t go to a different window now. That would show he was blatantly trying to avoid her.

He ended up at this counter by pure chance. While waiting in line for another, a new window suddenly opened, so he decided to save some time by heading over. However, Loren was so wary of Ivy that he suspected the window opened precisely because she had seen him in line.

In any case, Loren knew she was someone he couldn’t let his guard down around. Whether she realized that or not, Ivy put on her customer service smile behind the counter.

“I came to add a new member to my party.”

“So it’s finally over for the dynamic duo?” Ivy asked him, sounding a little surprised.

Loren winced. It wasn’t like he and Lapis were going their separate ways, so this “dynamic duo” was still going strong.

“Well if someone new is added to a two-person party,” answered Lapis, “it’s not a duo, now is it?”

“I never said you weren’t my partner anymore,” Loren answered, earning Lapis’s cheery smile.

Ivy seemed a bit envious as she watched the exchange; then she glanced at Gula behind them.

“Is that your new member?”

“You got that right. The name’s Gula. Pleasure’s all mine.”

“Gula...?” Ivy repeated after a pause.

Loren broke into a cold sweat, thinking the jig was already up, but after a moment’s thought, Ivy spread a sheet of paper over the counter.

“Please enter your information here. Can you write?”

Gula nodded. “No issues there. Leave it to me.”



She took the pen Ivy offered to fill in the necessary fields. *Come to think of it, I remember having to do that*, Loren thought while watching over her.

Meanwhile, Lapis surreptitiously whispered to him. “Did you have to do that too, Mr. Loren?”

“Well, I mean, doesn’t everyone have to fill out the form?”

“They do, but Mr. Loren, I didn’t know you could write.”

Speaking plainly, literacy was a rare and valuable skill. Few enjoyed such an extensive education, but Loren had received proper instruction in his mercenary days. He was more than capable of filling out paperwork.

His chief had insisted it would be impossible to do mercenary work without the ability to read contracts. It was only after Loren had quit the company that he realized this wasn’t normal for most of his peers.

“I guess you didn’t have any problems, Lapis.”

“I’m, you know. Well, I’m a priest, so I received proper schooling.”

“And Gula, you seem to be doing just fine.”

He peeked at Gula, who slickly spelled out her first name and moved on to input her last name; he lightly prodded her in the side. She glanced at him, wondering what she had done wrong, and Loren brusquely tapped his finger against the name field. Then, she finally realized she had almost written out her full name as a dark god. With a bitter smile, she kept it at “Gula” and moved on to the rest of the form.

The next field was about her birthplace. Gula thought a bit, and just when she was about to touch pen to paper, Loren whispered, “What are you putting down?”

“Well, they’re asking for my birthplace and all, so I’ve got to put Nuena, right?”

Their hushed conversations seemed to be piquing Ivy’s suspicions. Taking care not to be seen, Loren stepped on Gula’s foot beneath the counter.

She slapped a hand over her mouth to contain her yelp. With a businesslike

smile, Loren peeled her away from the counter, dragging her a safe distance. She looked like she had a few choice words for him, so he slapped her across the back of her head.

“The hell are you doing?”

“Are you stupid?” Loren asked. “There’s no telling what’ll happen if you turn it in with that name.”

“Well yeah, but it’s true.”

“You want a knuckle sandwich? I’ll feed ’em to you until that gluttony of yours is satisfied.”

This time he was readying not an open palm but a fist, and though Gula cowered, she gave him a look that made it clear she had no idea what else to write. And at the end of the day, Loren wasn’t too knowledgeable about geography himself.

He turned to Lapis. She let out a resigned sigh, then sidled close to Gula and whispered something in her ear.

The whispering continued a while, until finally Gula returned to the counter and began filling out the paper again, looking wholly unconvinced.

“I told her some random place to put down. They might suspect something, but they have no way of confirming those suspicions. It should be fine,” Lapis explained.

Well, if Lapis is saying so, it must be fine, Loren thought.

“I remember there being an age and job part to fill out,” he said.

“I gave her some very sensible answers to use. She is, as of right now, a twenty-one-year-old magician.”

Although Loren wondered if the guild might have some way of verifying her age, putting down the true number would identify her as some several-hundred years old. This was probably unavoidable. In fact, he was a little surprised Lapis had told her twenty-one; he thought she could have passed for younger.

“Incidentally, I am registered as an eighteen-year-old priest.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

According to Lapis, while demons were long-lived, they aged at around the same rate as humans until they reached adulthood. Her registered age was likely accurate. Lapis was also a bonafide priest to the god of knowledge, so, naturally, she hadn't put down a single lie.

“Is it easy to become a priest?”

“I happen to be very talented,” Lapis said as if it was nothing. She really was outstanding in her field, so Loren didn't press any further on the matter.

“What about you, Mr. Loren?” Lapis gazed at him, her eyes brimming with curiosity.

It took a bit of time for Loren to recall what he had written. “I think I said I was a twenty-two-year-old swordsman.”

“Yes, that sounds about right.”

As a matter of fact, Loren's own information was likely iffier than hers. For his age, he had tried to guess something in the right ballpark, but he had no way of knowing exactly. He was an orphan picked up by a mercenary company. With no way of knowing his own birthday, it was impossible to know how old he was.

His mercenary brother had estimated a rough age for him, so that's what he'd gone with.

On a side note, he had put his birthplace as the Portalia Republic. This was a nation at the northernmost point of the continent that had hardly any interaction with other nations. His chief had described it as extremely isolated.

Portalia was a common placeholder for those who couldn't know their own origins or who didn't want to divulge them. Choosing it was essentially advertising that something was amiss, but Loren honestly had no idea of his birthplace. Even if someone accused him of lying, he had a good excuse.

“You didn't tell Gula to put down Portalia, did you?”

“They'd think she was crazy if she said she came from the north, the way she dresses.”

Gula's outfit exposed her stomach and shoulders, offering little protection

from the cold. The town of Kaffa lay in the continent's southwest with a temperate climate, so Gula wouldn't be shivering outside of the deepest depths of winter.

"Well, you could have said she was sensitive to heat because she came from the north."

"That might work, but does the temperature even bother Ms. Gula to begin with?"

Loren tried to imagine someone calling themselves a dark god being put off by the heat and the cold, but he quickly found he lacked the imagination and gave up. If he had to say, it was too easy to picture Gula in those same skimpy clothes, laughing as she stood in the middle of a blizzard.

"As long as she doesn't write some long-fallen kingdom, I guess anywhere is fine."

"True. It's not that important, really."

Ultimately, Loren and Lapis agreed not to pay it any mind. They reached this conclusion just as Gula finished her paperwork and jogged back over to them. A copper identification tag dangled over her chest, proving her first success as an adventurer.

"They're a stingy bunch. Don't you think someone as strong as me should at least be iron, like you two?"

"Them's the breaks. Nothing we can do about it. And honestly, I think it'd be just as ridiculous if you were iron, so does it really make a difference?"

If strength was the rubric, Gula would be placed far higher than even iron. But guild regulation meant new adventurers started from copper with few exceptions. There was nothing remarkable about Gula starting from the bottom.

Copper, iron, and even silver were hardly any different, at least as far as Loren was concerned, but none of that erased the dissatisfaction from Gula's face.

"I wanted to be the same as you two. Now it's like I'm outta the loop."

"You'll get up there in no time. Just hold out until then."

“Rather, do you plan to operate alongside us until your rank increases, Ms. Gula?” Lapis asked, sounding similarly displeased.

Gula grinned and replied, “I’m fine with sticking around ’til death do us part.”

“That is quite bothersome. Mainly in regards to food expenses.”

Lapis’s harsh words compelled Gula to snuggle up against her, batting her eyelashes in a bid to look pitiful, but Lapis brushed her aside. It was hard to tell whether they got along or not, and Loren simply hoped they wouldn’t cause any trouble. He wanted to hurry them along to a better meeting place to work out their future plans, and they were about to follow his lead. Then it happened.

“Oh?”

“Ah, sorry.”

Just as Gula began to walk, her shoulder bumped against a passing adventurer.

Gula immediately apologized, but after looking Gula over from head to toe, and seeing her comrades, the adventurer grinned. Evidently, trouble was coming all on its own. At least, Loren felt that way; he dropped his face into one hand.

Since he’s human, I ought to at least try talking to him, Loren thought with a sigh.

The adventurer who had bumped Gula’s shoulder laughed off these words. “You think sorry fixes everything?”

“I’ll ask just to be sure. You know who I am?” Loren asked.

For a moment, the adventurer inspected Loren’s face quizzically but soon regained his mocking smile. “Nope, never heard of you. What ditch did you crawl out of?”

“I see, well, that settles it.”

Loren didn’t assume he’d be recognized, really, but he’d found himself in a similar situation before. Loren and Lapis had solved that problem by beating the aggressors half to death. Loren could hope that at least one person had him marked down as a dangerous individual.

Such a convenient list would ensure his opponents understood what a disaster it would be to tangle with Loren's party. Unfortunately, it seemed they weren't so lucky.

Loren considered which of them might be best suited to dealing with this grinning adventurer—who would be able to contain the situation without causing a whole new mess of problems?

Gula, for one, was out of the question. It didn't take a genius to realize that dark gods didn't avoid problems, they made them. Then what about Lapis? He got the feeling Lapis could easily take control of the situation, but as she gave every appearance of being a delicate lass, other people tended to look down on her. To negotiate, she would need to overturn that misconception, and however she managed that would make more enemies than friends.

"Looks like it's up to me..." Loren muttered, turning to their new friend.

Now that the adventurer was facing Loren head-on, the man took a few steps back, perhaps overwhelmed by the former mercenary's physique. Loren's height, the width of his muscles—maybe they weren't impressive enough to call awe-inspiring, but Loren certainly possessed the power to wield the massive sword on his back.

This realization did occasionally daunt those who squared up against him, though other times they waved it off.

This time, the guy picking a fight was seasoned enough to measure Loren's abilities from only a brief confrontation. Just not enough to back off, and that alone made him a pain to deal with.

It would have been so much simpler if he had been the sort to retreat after a glimpse of Loren's abilities. Though this adventurer looked put off, he stood his ground. Whether this was foolhardiness or courage, Loren didn't know.

Maybe he's a skilled fighter, but then he shouldn't be picking fights with copper-ranks, thought Loren.

The man's reasons soon became clear. Though he faced Loren, the adventurer's gaze would occasionally flit toward Gula. Apparently, Gula's scanty clothing and the copper ID at her chest had given this man some foolish ideas.

Loren could understand where the guy was coming from, but he'd really picked the wrong person to mess with.

Just as Loren was about to speak, the adventurer disappeared before his very eyes. It happened so suddenly he had to wonder if Gula had eaten the guy, but when he whipped around to her, Gula just shook her head. Her desperate appeal: Not me!

Loren racked his brain for what could have happened, only to be hauled back to attention by the voices of the adventurer's supposed comrades. They all jabbed their fingers in one direction, and Loren took in the sight of numerous destroyed tables and that poor adventurer who had been dragged along with them. The man, standing before them just a moment ago, was now bent in all sorts of unnatural ways with his back half-buried in the wall.

Yes, it was so sudden that Loren was still stuck in a daze when someone tapped on his shoulder.

"Out of the way, if you don't want to end up like that."

The voice belonged to a woman. The hand on his shoulder was clad in a crude metal gauntlet painted red.

Obedying the voice in his head, the one telling him to clear the way immediately, Loren moved aside. The owner of the gauntlet passed by without sparing him a second glance.

He caught a glimpse of her as she went. She wasn't wearing a helmet; the long hair streaming behind her was crimson. Her eyes were red as well, her lips also a vivid scarlet.

She wore strangely revealing plate armor. It was heavily ornamented, to the point where it seemed excessive, yet open in the most unnecessary places to expose her skin.

She was not particularly tall. Loren could tell she was about the same height as Lapis.

Feeling the weight of his gaze, the woman in red glanced back at him. "What, you want to die?"

“No, just thinking that I don’t recognize you.”

It was hard to imagine from her appearance, but she had to have been the one who had sent a relatively robust man flying all the way into the wall. Well aware that a single slip up could condemn him to the same fate, Loren chose his words carefully.

“This is the first time I’ve been here, so of course you don’t recognize me. Were it my own choice, I would never have come, but I have business here.”

And with that, the woman was on her way again, only to halt suddenly. Loren wondered if he had done something he shouldn’t have as she turned her eyes back to him.

“Have we met somewhere before?” she asked.

“No clue. Not that I can remember.”

The woman inspected his face for a moment, only to fall short of dredging up the recollection she sought. She cocked her head a bit as she turned away, only to then be blocked by a different adventuring party.

“Oi, wench! Look at what you’ve done!”

Yeah, I can’t blame them for hollering at her, Loren thought as he herded Lapis and Gula away with a push on the back for them both.

Admittedly, the adventurers’ comrade had been trying to pick a fight with another adventurer, but he had been sent careening into the wall, for seemingly no reason at all, by an absolute stranger who had come out of nowhere.

The man was almost certainly heavily injured and the party would have a vacancy for the foreseeable future. This would directly impact their earnings.

It was only human to want to complain about the woman who caused all that trouble, but in this case, they were failing to account for a very important factor. Alas, they had picked the wrong person to mess with.

Loren had been right in the middle of it, and even he didn’t know what the woman had done. In the blink of an eye, she had brought complete silence to the guild, and considering her skills, no one was going to demand a reckoning.

The fallen man's party, surrounding her, either hadn't thought that far into it, or had realized this, but were confident enough in their own abilities to tickle the dragon.

"It was his fault for blocking the path. If he is injured, it is his fault for being so frail."

Her words were frank and no nonsense, yet gave off absolutely no intention of swaying anyone to her side. Naturally, the adventurers these words were directed at remained unsatisfied. Their faces twisted in rage, and some even reached for their weapons.

"He was out picking a fight, yeah. He might have gotten what he deserved, but there was no need to go so far. Am I wrong?" A man—perhaps the party leader—asked, his thumb pointing at the adventurer buried in the wall.

The woman's response was curt. "Consider that he simply had terrible luck. That meeting me was his misfortune."

"So you're not even going to offer a word of apology? I'm giving you a chance..."

"You're not making sense. You want me, Tizona, to apologize? This must be a bad joke."

Loren pretended he wasn't listening as he swiftly searched his memory for the name Tizona. She thought they may have met before; even if Loren didn't remember it, there was a chance she was right. It was on the tip of his tongue when his train of thought was interrupted.

"In our business, you're done the moment people look down on you. I can't let it end here."

"You're staking your life on your honor? Then come at me with the resolve to die."

The woman called Tizona stood still, waiting.

As far as Loren could see, while Tizona's armor was splendid, she did not carry any weapons. For a moment, the possibility of her being a magician crossed his mind, but if that was the case, he couldn't see why she would wear (exposing)

full plate armor.

“You’re in for a world of hurt!”

On their leader’s declaration, the adventurers surrounding the woman drew their weapons as one.

By this point, the situation had far exceeded a scuffle among adventurers. This was a straight-up war. Given that his party had been the cause of the ruckus, Loren considered drawing his sword to assist the heavily outnumbered woman, but Lapis stayed his hand.

“What?”

“I have the feeling we should get away while we can.”

“I’m with lil’ Lapis here. That woman gives off a crazy vibe.”

“Crazy enough for you to call her crazy?”

That meant this was a really big deal.

After a moment’s silence, Gula answered, “Let me rephrase, she gives off a slight tingling.”

Suddenly, Tizona was far more manageable, but giving Gula a slight tingling was no small matter. There was no harm in being cautious, so Loren gave up on helping her and went along with Lapis.

The quick-witted among the adventurers had distanced themselves long ago, and some who were a little slower on the uptake followed their clever comrades. There was now a good deal of open space around the woman.

“Last chance for apologies...”

“Never,” said Tizona. “Just come at me already. I’ll turn you all to ash. That will make this quick and easy.”

Tizona reached her hand toward the man. Around it coiled a snake-like flickering flame, and only then did Loren recall a certain name. Loren knew he had already missed his chance to tell them to run. This was his first time seeing the woman he had only heard stories of, and so he hadn’t recognized the danger quickly enough.

Still, Loren had to shout out, “Run!”

He didn’t know if those adventurers still facing Tizona realized that this shout was directed at them. The moment he realized who their foe was, the moment that scream escaped his lips, he had already hoisted Lapis under his arm and taken flight.

Gula followed a moment behind. In the same moment, Tizona opened her mouth.

“Burn it down. Ashes to ashes. And dust to ashes, too.”

The moment these sing-song words reached their conclusion, the adventurers facing Tizona burst into flame. They had no time to scream. Their flame-clad bodies were fully alight before they could even smoke or stink of burning flesh. Despite several men being enveloped in such strong flames, that fire did not spread to the surroundings as the bodies lost their shape. In the blink of an eye, all that remained was a pile of ash on the floor.

It was a slaughter so abrupt, so anticlimactic, that not a word was uttered. All eyes simply gathered on the desolate mountain of soot.

Only Tizona, the creator, could move. Slowly lowering her arm and looking around, she confirmed no one else had any complaints. Despite having immolated several people, she looked wholly unimpressed. She turned to Loren, who had booked it to the far wall with Lapis in tow.

“Do you know about me?”

Tap. Tap. Her shoes struck the ground as she slowly walked toward them. Loren couldn’t reply. He knew about her, sure, but this was the first time he’d ever gotten a proper look at her. The impact of her showmanship knocked his words from his mouth.

“What was that?” Gula muttered, dumbfounded.

Her question finally spurred Loren’s tense lips to move. “She’s the bloody Infernal Edge.”

“If you know of me, does that mean we come from the same trade? We must have met somewhere before, I know it.”

“Can’t say that we have. At least, this is my first time seeing you.”

“Then it must have been on the battlefield. There’s a high chance my attention was one-sided... Have you always used that sword?”

Her eyes flitted to the sword sheathed on Loren’s back.

Loren had used a similar sword in his mercenary days, but that had been an ordinary weapon of plain iron, nothing to hold a candle to his current, entirely black blade.

Lapis had recommended the new sword after adventuring with her had broken his last one. But maybe Tizona had a reason for her insistence.

“No, I bought this one recently. The one I used before... snapped.”

“Was it similar, then? A massive sword like a lump of iron?”

“Yeah, I can see why people would call it that.”

He considered lying to get out of the situation; unfortunately, there was no telling what Tizona might do if she caught him at it, and he figured better safe than sorry when the risk was immolation.

“As I thought. Then you must be that mercenary they called the Cleaving Gale.”

“Hell no. I don’t have an epithet like you lot, who can single handedly change the course of a whole war. I was never that much of a big deal.”

Lapis recalled having similar conversations with Loren. From her place still tucked under Loren’s arm, she looked between Loren and Tizona. Loren was completely earnest, no hint of a lie in his expression. For some reason, Tizona seemed satisfied with his answer.

“So you are the Cleaving Gale. What are you doing out here? I heard your company fell through, have you given it up altogether?”

“I’m telling you, you’re wrong. Yeah, the people I was with fell to pieces and I washed my hands of the whole business. But I didn’t have any fancy title. I was your run-of-the-mill mercenary.”

As Loren insisted she was mistaken, Tizona just looked at him as if she

perfectly understood everything.

Feeling that the two mercenaries were talking past one another, Lapis wriggled out of Loren's grasp and asked, "Umm, excuse me. Is it all right if I gave my input?"

It was only then that Tizona realized Lapis was there. She looked at the priest, thought for a moment, and nodded.

"In regards to this Cleaving Gale name, you can plainly see that Mr. Loren denies it. Are you sure there hasn't been some sort of misunderstanding?"

"Yes, he denies it... But this man is the Cleaving Gale. There is no doubt about it."

Tizona said it with such overflowing confidence that Lapis was nearly convinced. She didn't think Loren was lying, per se, but perhaps he simply wasn't aware of his own reputation.

Beyond that, there was one more thing Lapis had to say.

"Putting that aside, your foes did draw their weapons and instigate the fight, but I have the nagging feeling taking care of them like you did will cause some trouble."

Tizona's face stiffened for a moment. *Looks like she didn't give a lick of thought to the consequences*, Loren realized as Tizona looked at the pile of ash.

"Was that a bad idea?" she muttered.

"Well, in battles between adventurers, it's fine as long as you didn't start it... I've delivered quite a few brutal counterattacks of my own, but I don't think I've gone as far as killing anyone... Have I?"

"I haven't," Loren said. "Probably."

Sure, he'd thrown people around a bit and maybe crushed some bones here and there, but just to put them out of commission. He didn't think he'd killed anyone from the guild.

"I am not an adventurer."

If Tizona was the Infernal Edge, as Loren said, then while she was famous, she

was still a mercenary. Lapis knew the rules of adventurer scuffles, but no one knew what standards applied to a quarrel with an outsider.

A new voice piped up. “In that case, I would love to hear what you have to say. Could you come with me for a moment?”

It was Ivy. The guild receptionist had a smile on her face, yet she gave off a rather bone-chilling air as she grabbed Tizona by the shoulder.

Surely Tizona could have easily resisted if she wanted to, but her expression froze over and her eyes shot to Loren for help. Loren didn’t want to get involved with either the mercenary or the receptionist. He immediately looked away.

“Then let’s go to the back. Don’t worry, I won’t take up much of your time. It’ll all be over soon, it won’t hurt. Just turn yourself in.”

“Turn myself in?! Hey, Cleaving Gale! Shouldn’t fellow mercenaries help one another?! Hey, are you listening!”

There was no way she could have been dragged away by force, and yet as Ivy grabbed her shoulder and pulled her along, Tizona flailed her arms and legs, looking to Loren for help.

Lapis pointed at her with a face that made it clear she didn’t want to be involved either. “She’s calling for you.”

“Not my problem. Didn’t you say it yourself? I’m not the Cleaving Gale. Not to mention, I’ve only ever heard of the Infernal Edge through rumor.”

As far as Lapis could tell, Loren still wasn’t lying. She didn’t know if Tizona was, either. But whether Loren was a famous mercenary or not, it didn’t matter at this point. Rather than worrying about it, Lapis focused on not getting tangled up in Tizona’s problem.

“Then let’s pretend we never saw anything and find a quest to pay for Ms. Gula’s meal costs. If she keeps eating at this rate, we’ll be out on the streets in no time.”

“Do you really have to eat that much?” Loren asked with a sigh.

Gula bashfully scratched her head. “Well, ya know. There was a long, long time when I couldn’t eat anything decent, and after that, it was nothing but

junk. Normal meals are just so tasty, I...”

“I get where you’re coming from. But can you quit bankrupting us?”

“While we’re at it, are there any high-paying jobs? Better yet, any that Ms. Gula can do on her own?”

“Lapis, you’re heartless...”

Lapis was only insisting she pay for herself, but Gula sidled up to her with pleading eyes. It would be miserable to go into the red from food costs; Loren sorted through his mental list of jobs. It all put Tizona completely out of his thoughts.

Just their luck, they were unable to find any profitable quests. They gave up, returned to the inn, and decided to check again the next day. And up until that next day—when Ivy apprehended them and brought them to the back room—Loren completely forgot about Tizona.

Chapter 2:

An Explanation to Camp

“I’LL BE FRANK. The guild has a quest for you.”

That was the first thing Ivy said after leading them to one of the handfuls of rooms behind the counter. It was quite a dreary place, devoid of any furnishings besides the table they were sitting at.

Lapis and Gula sat on either side of Loren. They were joined across the table by Ivy in her guild uniform, and Tizona, who, for some reason, seemed to be trying to make herself look smaller.

He could feel something unpleasant in the air, but Loren had to speak up.

“Straight from the guild? Must be serious, then.”

There was no quest form. It was a direct order from the adventurers’ guild, and that reeked of trouble. Loren didn’t want to take it on if he didn’t have to, and he tried to make this as apparent as possible in his voice.

Surely Ivy got the message, but her expression didn’t change.

She continued, unperturbed, “The quest involves the investigation of unexplored ruins that apparently lie in the mountain range south of Kaffa. As for a more detailed breakdown, travel should take eight days for a round trip. The investigation should take three, for a total of eleven days. You will be paid one gold coin per head, and necessary expenses will be covered separately.”

Loren didn’t know much about the local landscape. He looked to Lapis for more information.

Not looking away from Ivy’s firm expression, Lapis explained. “She must be talking about that relatively small mountainous region to the southwest. It was called... No, I don’t believe it even has a name. You’re saying there’s an unexplored ruin there?”

Her question was answered, not by Ivy, but by Tizona. “We’re the ones who spotted it. It’s like a fort camouflaged to blend into the face of one of the

mountains. We didn't go too close, but we'd never heard any reports of ruins there, so I imagine it is unexplored."

"On to my next question. What is Ms. Tizona doing here?"

"I'll be honest with you... our company is going through some financial troubles," Tizona said, tone meek, cheeks red, and eyes downcast.

She seemed to be ashamed of her circumstances, but in Loren's experience, it was perfectly normal for mercenary companies to struggle to make ends meet. It was just as common for these struggles to fail, and he couldn't understand what was so embarrassing about it.

But the more he listened, the more he got the impression that Tizona herself had been the source of those financial woes. *I see, then she should certainly be ashamed of that.*

"What did you do?" he asked.

"I...burnt our client's soldiers."

According to Tizona, her last job devolved into a free-for-all brawl with enemy and allied troops in a jumbled mess. The situation didn't seem to be getting anywhere, so she used her power to incinerate friend and foe alike.

And it wasn't just a few, or even a few dozen. Without any exaggeration, she had crispy-fried soldiers in the triple digits.

As the war ended in a victory for her side, her client declined to press criminal charges but had still demanded immense reparations. Her very company was now drowning in debt because of her.

"What are you, stupid?"

"That was idiotic."

"Whadja expect?"

A prompt and harsh evaluation from all three members of the party caused Tizona's face to flush red.

"Well what was I supposed to do?!" she protested, "There were too many enemies for me to use *Roast!*"

“Roast?”

“It’s my gift. That’s why I’m called the Infernal Edge among mercenaries.”

You sure you should be telling us that? Loren wondered, but Tizona didn’t seem to mind at all. She casually laid out how her gift worked; *Roast*, as the name implied, allowed her to create small zones where anything contained within would be subject to her flames. At most, each area covered about a single person.

As long as *Roast* made contact, there was absolutely no way to defend against it. Her gift ate up anything without discrimination or consideration of usual flammability, and it didn’t have any effect on anything outside of its targeted areas. It seemed far too powerful, but its range was quite limited, and it was only possible for Tizona to ignite a handful of zones at once. This was—at least according to her—its flaw.

“I had no choice but to burn them through separate means... My comrades all noticed I was about to attack and ran away, so they were fine. But our client’s soldiers just stayed stuck on the enemy despite our signals. In fact, their brawling grew even more confused. I knew it would only get worse the longer things went on, so I decided I would make it quick and painless.”

“Wow. How generous...”

Tizona didn’t explain how she had done it, but she had managed to burn hundreds of soldiers at once. *I guess those mercs with epithets are made of different stuff*, Loren thought. But really, anyone who presented such a great danger to allies was far more trouble than they were worth.

More importantly, this woman, Tizona, had to be off-kilter to even consider such a damaging gambit. *Ultimately, she must be an idiot*, he concluded. Then he sent a glance to Ivy, who had sat quiet through the conversation.

“I understand the situation, but why does it have to be us?”

He tried to imply a strong *don’t bring me any unnecessary trouble* with his tone. Ivy shrugged, spelling out the reason as if it was nothing.

“Well, you seemed to know her.”

It seemed the guild also thought Tizona and her sob story were troublesome. They couldn't just dump the problem on some poor soul who had nothing to do with it, and so they looked to Loren and his party.

"I've never seen her in my life."

"Then it's because you're fellow former mercenaries."

"I'm a former mercenary. She isn't. I mean, she doesn't plan to become an adventurer, does she?"

Tizona nodded. "I'm going to stick it out as a mercenary. I owe a debt to the chief. If the chief told me to quit, I would, but I don't anticipate that happening anytime soon."

"Yeah, don't try to sound so noble after what you've done."

It was impossible to manage mercenaries without money. Even ignoring managerial costs, a company that couldn't pay reparations to a client for a botched job was essentially selling all its members into indentured servitude. Those that skirted payment would attract attention of a nasty sort.

"Our client actually offered to write off the reparations if I alone was indentured."

That's not the worst deal, Loren thought. Tizona was a mercenary with an epithet and a formidable ability. She was just what an army needed to fill the gaping hole left by several hundred soldiers. In addition to that, she was a beautiful woman, if you could disregard personality, which might make her useful outside of combat. All in all, perhaps she was worth even more than the soldiers she had killed.

"Worst case, I am considering taking the offer. As I've mentioned, I owe a debt to our chief. If giving myself up is enough to settle this matter, I am not completely against it."

"They won't treat you well, I assure you," Loren said.

"Yes, I was told I would be treated as a slave. But it is simply unavoidable if that is what is required. In any case, that was my intention, but then I recalled the ruins we spotted on a past job. Seeing as this is my last opportunity, I

wanted to give it a try.”



The rest of Tizona's tale was far simpler. She scraped together the money she had saved, asked her chief for some time off, and invested all her funds into the adventurers' guild to find comrades for her expedition.

Some of her colleagues insisted she was going to run away and leave them holding the bag, but her chief had no qualms about sending her off.

"If I want to repay the chief, I'm going to need money. A lot of it. That's why I'm betting on these ruins. Is there any way I could earn your assistance?"

Tizona placed her hands on the table and bowed so low her forehead rested against the wood as well. Watching this, Loren thought, *Unknown ruins are a real gamble, but with a bit of luck, you can get rich in an instant.*

It wasn't a terrible idea.

Her combat abilities were more than sufficient; she was seeking assistance simply because fighting strength had little to do with exploration; and she was smart enough to realize that she would need an adventurer's skillset.

Of course, Loren couldn't tell which way the risk-reward bet would swing.

If Tizona was right and those ruins contained something profitable enough to pay off her immense reparations, then a single gold coin was a bit lacking. However, given the possibility that the ruins were barren, a gold coin was good enough money to take the gamble.

Loren asked, "You got any proof those ruins are untouched?"

"The guild will guarantee that," Ivy answered. "I went through our archives and have found no records of any ruins being discovered or investigated at the point Ms. Tizona specified. We can't discount graverobbers, but there is a high chance they are unexplored."

Not wanting to send their adventurers on a fool's errand, the guild kept detailed information on known ruins. Of course, they didn't control everyone who might poke around in ruins, but if stolen goods entered the market, so too would information on their origins. It was part of the guild's duties to follow these threads.

"What do you wanna do? I don't think it's the worst idea."

If he was going to make a decision, Loren needed to have his party's input. He turned to Lapis and Gula, and it was Gula who spoke up first.

"If it'll make a pretty penny, I don't got no problems with that."

"In my case, well... I think they can sweeten the deal a bit more."

Aren't you being a bit greedy there? Loren wondered. But he was interested in how Tizona would take Lapis's opinion and didn't chime in.

"I understand," Tizona said. "I just want to pay my reparations; I need no more than that. I promise to increase your payment depending on what we find."

Her decision was swift.

Loren didn't really care whether they accepted or not, but he saw Lapis lightly clenching her fist in victory and decided it wasn't the worst option.

"Can I take that as you formally accepting the quest?" Ivy verified.

Loren nodded. With that, Tizona's expression relaxed ever-so-slightly.

"There's something I want to ask you, Ms. Human Firestarter."

"You're quite a rude one, I see..."

The next morning, Lapis stood with Tizona at Kaffa's south gate.

After accepting the quest, they were briefed on a few more details. Then they began preparing to set off; Loren was now off with Gula, renting a donkey to carry their things. Lapis and Tizona were left to watch over their travel bags.

It was far too boring to simply wait in silence for their party's return, so Lapis had tried to spark conversation. For some reason, this earned her a harsh frown.

"Ms. Indiscriminate Pyromaniac?"

"Call me by my name. You can skip the Ms. part too. So what is it?"

Tizona got the feeling her nicknames would only get worse the longer she let Lapis be, so her response was a bit curt. After staring at Tizona blankly for a

moment, Lapis spent some time thinking and came out with a new name.

“Ms. Moving Crematorium?”

“Do you want to be incinerated?”

She lit a small flame at her fingertips as a threat, glaring at Lapis sternly. However, Lapis seemed completely unmoved.

“You won’t be able to earn Mr. Loren’s cooperation if you burn me,” Lapis replied, calm as anything. “And after that scene you caused in the bar, are there any other adventurers who would assist you?”

“Just ask your question already. Are all priests as cynical as you?”

Lapis made a sound argument; Tizona snuffed out her flame with a sigh. The Bar Incident was two days ago now, and Tizona realized, in retrospect, that reducing those adventurers to ash was maybe a bad idea. Tizona’s name and face had already spread among the town and adventurers. According to rumor, she would incinerate anyone over the smallest grievance. There weren’t any adventurers reckless enough to even consider her request.

Tizona only learned this after Loren’s party accepted the job—only when she saw other adventurers looking at the party with pitying eyes. By then, it was already too late, and there was nothing she could do.

Her regrets only went as far as, *Maybe I should have kept it at minor burns*, but that meant not using *Roast* at all. She would have to rely on a different ability, which she was not as skilled at containing.

Knowing the conversation wouldn’t get anywhere if she continued to tease, Lapis moved on to her point. “It’s about Mr. Loren.”

“Oh, yes. About whether he is the Cleaving Gale or not? In that case, my answer is thus: he is definitely the Cleaving Gale. I guarantee it.”

Lapis always had her faint suspicions, but Loren would matter-of-factly deny it whenever he was asked. This made her second-guess herself. Just as she considered finding an active mercenary to double-check with, Tizona appeared.

As for Tizona, her answer was immediate and definitive, taking Lapis by surprise.

“First, there’s his appearance and his weapon of choice, but the greater proof is how he denies being the Cleaving Gale. He is extremely obstinate in his refusal to recognize it.”

“Why is that proof?”

As far as Lapis could tell, it wasn’t a bad thing for a mercenary to have an epithet, to become a feared existence on the battlefield. In fact, that would raise their market value, increasing the number and quality of their contracts. Such notoriety would have a marked return on investment for their company.

That was Lapis’s take on it, at least, but Tizona folded her arms, glancing in the direction Loren had gone for the donkey, and said, “Mostly because it brings nothing but trouble for the company.”

“Trouble? How do you figure?”

“A company having one renowned mercenary makes it harder for the other members to stand out. If that wasn’t bad enough, countries begin to view the company differently from others. Sometimes, that works out in their favor, but it oftentimes works against them.”

Surely a company with such a skilled mercenary should be capable of this or that, clients would say as they sent far more members to an early grave.

“At first, I was on cloud nine when they called me the Infernal Edge. Now, I regret ever accepting that name. The company itself may have received better treatment, but we were thrust into far more danger as a result.”

“So you’re saying Loren refuses to recognize his epithet because he fears that?”

“As long as he denies it, it cannot be used as leverage against him. Most fearsome of all, his name still spreads despite his absolute denial of it.”

Though he rejected it, the epithet had still gained a life of its own. Usually, the legends would die the moment a mercenary refused to attribute their accomplishments to the name, yet his epithet lived on and lived strong.

“Also consider that the Cleaving Gale falls unconscious the moment his battle is over. You’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

Lapis nodded silently. During battle, there were times when Loren would inadvertently tap into extraordinary wells of strength; she'd seen it several times before. He'd lately managed to draw it out of his own volition, but as that strength slowly grew, it would sap away his mind, and when it left his body, the recoil was harsh.

As Loren consciously awakened more and more of his latent power, Lapis mulled over the consequences in secret. The burden on his body was simply inevitable, and she had yet to find any way to prevent it.

"When you suffer a terrible injury, you often forget the surrounding events. If that is happening to Loren, there's a chance he forgets his battles fought as the Cleaving Gale."

Still, the stories told after would give him a vague idea of what had happened. Tizona's first reason was most likely the main one.

"I guess Mr. Loren really was quite strong in his day."

Loren was still nowhere to be seen, so Lapis continued trying to draw out what information she could.

Tizona unfolded her arms, placed a hand on her chin, and after thinking a moment, said hesitantly, "I've never gone against him, so it is hard for me to gauge his strength."

"Have you ever found yourselves as allies or enemies in battle?"

"Mercenaries have no sworn allies or enemies. A change of clients is enough to decide where we stand. It is common for someone who fought by your side one day to join your foe the next."

Driven by the highest bid, mercenaries never settled in one place. They detached themselves from everything but the job—Lapis understood this, but she couldn't help but wonder how they wrangled that on an emotional level.

"It's quite simple: if you can't live with it, you can't be a mercenary. If we're talking about Loren, I've killed a decent number of his friends, and he's killed a fair number of mine. If we held grudges over it, we wouldn't be cut out for the job."

“Is that how it works?”

“That’s how it has to work.” With that answer, Tizona removed her hand from her chin and folded her arms in front of her chest again. “As for your other question. He was no ordinary opponent. That’s what I would have said about him, in his mercenary days.”

“I can’t say I understand.”

“I didn’t know whether he was strong or weak, but he was someone I knew I should never underestimate. This might sound like me bragging, but he is the first and last person to see through and avoid my *Roast*, the very first time he faced it.”

Roast was a powerful gift, the sort of completely unfair ability that gave no indication who or what it was targeting before the incineration began. A victim wouldn’t even realize they were in danger until they were enveloped in flames, and once ignited, there was no escaping being burnt to ash.

Yet when pitted against Tizona, Loren somehow managed to evade it.

“How did he do it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve put a lot of thought into that...and I have absolutely no idea.” Tizona stared at Lapis, expression serious. “Could you ask him if you ever get the opportunity? I need to know. I can’t get the question out of my head.”

It wouldn’t be difficult to ask, but Lapis couldn’t shake the feeling she wouldn’t get a satisfactory answer. Loren had the devil’s own luck; his survival of *Roast* had no doubt been borne of vague instincts or pure chance. Lapis was better off not sharing that particular tidbit with Tizona.

Lapis’s thoughts trailed off just as Loren finally approached. He wasn’t carrying any of his usual equipment, though he was followed by Gula, who led two donkeys. He had left all his things with Lapis, but the donkeys already had some bags loaded onto them for some reason.

“Welcome back, Mr. Loren. Incidentally, what are the donkeys carrying?” Lapis asked, tone doubtful as she jogged up to Loren.

Loren scratched his head while Gula gave an embarrassed smile. “Extra food

supplies. Gula said what we packed wasn't enough."

"Wait a moment," Tizona protested. "By my estimation, the amount prepared should be sufficient for four people for the duration of this operation."

As a matter of fact, Lapis thought it would be more than enough under normal circumstances. Though they couldn't exactly tell Tizona the truth, they had told her to pack more for Gula than the other members. Even so, Gula insisted it wasn't enough.

"Gula, was it? How much do you plan to pack into that body of yours? Honestly, I don't see where you can fit it."

"My chest, mostly. Whaddaya think, Loren?"

As Gula stuck out her tube-top, Loren lowered a fist onto the crown of her head. Her skull let out a hearty thud, and Gula held her head. Loren sighed.

"I'm letting you off this time because Tizona is picking up our expenses. There won't be a next time, so prepare yourself and cut down a bit."

"I'd prefer it if you held back... My wallet is not bottomless," Tizona said, though she knew her protest was pointless.

It was, however, Lapis who landed the finishing blow. "Isn't it too late to complain about that? I mean, I already purchased two first-class pillows and sleeping bags as necessary expenses."

"What are you doing?! No, first off, why did you buy two each?"

Tizona's eyes widened at Lapis's confession, but Lapis seemed completely unperturbed.

"For me and Mr. Loren," she said as a matter of fact. "Ah, not to worry, I prepared normal ones for everyone else."

"Hey, Lapis, ain't that unfair? Keeping the good stuff to yourself?!"

"You're already taking up most of our food expenses, so please put up with it."

This cold rebuke forced Gula to debate in her head whether she preferred food or sleep. A consternated look crossed her face, but she ultimately reached

her conclusion. “Well, fine. I’ll survive.”

“At this rate, if this investigation comes up empty, I’ll be sold off for debt even before I can be sold for reparations...”

Visions of an unwelcome future darkened Tizona’s face. Loren patted her bracingly on the back.

“You should talk it over with Lapis. She might charge an insane amount of interest, but I’m sure she’ll cut you a deal.”

“Our doors are always open!” Lapis energetically replied.

Staring straight at Lapis, Tizona’s shoulders slumped, her dark expression growing even darker.

After their departure from Kaffa, the journey proceeded so smoothly that Loren was a little surprised. It was only the first day, and they hadn’t gone far yet, but the sun set on an uneventful trek down the main roads. From time to time, they exchanged greetings with a passing traveler, but there was nothing else of note.

Even so, the party hadn’t been able to travel quite as far as they hoped before setting up camp in the plains running alongside the highway.

“Am I the only one who feels we’re going strangely slow?”

“No, I’m sure everyone here thinks so.”

“The cause...has to be that.”

Lapis’s eyes locked onto the two haggard donkeys. They had been laden with so many provisions that anyone would know they were overloaded at a glance, and the cause of this—Gula—offered an apologetic, helpless smile.

“Sorry ’bout that. It’s all because of my appetite.”

“We don’t really care, but don’t you feel sorry for the donkeys? Apologize to them.”

“Sorry, sorry, both of you. If I wasn’t such a big eater...”

A wry smile escaped Tizona’s lips as she watched Gula kowtowing to the

donkeys, but Lapis, who knew what Gula really was, could hardly believe her eyes. Who had first declared Gula a dark god? Lapis couldn't say, but she had to wonder what that individual would think upon seeing Gluttony like this.

The next thing to twist Lapis's face into a conflicted frown was Loren returning with a mountain of branches and twigs he had cut or scavenged around the area.

"Tizona, light these up for us."

She was called the Infernal Edge, so surely she was good for handling fire. At least, that was what Loren thought when he asked.

Yet Tizona pulled a miserable face and protested, "Hold on, I am not a tinderbox. And there's greenwood mixed in here."

"You can't dry it?"

"I can, but... You know my epithet, don't you? And you're still treating me like this?"

Was this not beneath an epithet-toting mercenary's duties? Tizona was looking increasingly miserable.

Loren replied plainly, "Hey, it's none of my business. If you're not doing it, we'll buy proper firewood at the next station town. A necessary expense, of course, and we'll need to camp out a few more times on the search and return trip. With that in mind, we'll have to buy quite a bit. That good with you?"

"Please...let me do it."

It was only firewood, but the costs would still add up. If she could compensate with labor, she knew she should, and so immediately folded.

As Tizona held a hand over the pile of wood, Lapis asked her, "You're able to dry them?"

"Don't I just have to heat them just short of catching fire? Worst case, I can light them up, and that serves our purposes too."

"That's not magic, though, is it?"

Lapis's curiosity as a priest to the god of knowledge was piqued, and Tizona

seemed to have no intention of hiding anything.

Glaring at the wood, she answered, “That’s also my gift. A different one from *Roast*.”

“Isn’t that too convenient? Let me think... Was there a spell that let you dry things...?”

“Don’t ask me. It was never meant to be used like this to begin with. Rather, shouldn’t you be a bit more surprised upon learning I have two gifts?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Apart from Tizona, the only other gift holder Lapis knew was a male adventurer called Claes. Claes possessed *Boost*, a gift that allowed him to raise the abilities of himself and anything in contact with him, but she had never thought to ask if he had two.

Perhaps Claes was hiding a card up his sleeve, or perhaps that really was his only gift. They’d never know unless they asked him, but judging by Tizona’s tone, it was rare to possess more than one.

“Gifts are rare enough already, and I have two of them. Yet here you are, using me to dry your wood...”

“It’s nice to find versatile applications for your abilities.”

“You’re making it sound as if I’m doing something advanced right now.”

“Incidentally, what sort of gift is it?”

“It’s called *Heat*. Right now, I’m using it to heat up the wood without burning it. This is the ability that torched my client’s soldiers, and the main reason behind my epithet.” Tizona gave her left hand a slight wave. In an instant, flames sprayed from her palm, quickly coalescing into a sword of fire. “This is how it is supposed to be used.”

She’d shown off what she had to and needed it no longer. After she opened the hand clenched around the hilt, the sword went up in smoke just as suddenly as it had appeared.

Lapis sounded genuinely impressed when she said, “We’ll never need matches again.”

“You are the first person to respond that way to my ability.”

Though her shoulders were slumped, Tizona continued her work and soon the massive pile of firewood was dry. Even with the hearty supply of fuel, Loren barely managed to cook enough food for Gula’s dinner.

“You seriously used almost all of that wood?!”

Tizona thought she had dried out more than enough, but once dinner was over, they only had enough left to keep a single campfire going through the night.

Ignoring Tizona’s surprise, Loren pointed at Gula and, tired, said, “You saw how much we had to cook... If you’ve got complaints, say ’em to that glutton.”

“That only filled me about thirty percent,” Gula groaned, rubbing her exposed stomach. Tizona had seen her scarf down unimaginable amounts, and it was a mystery where it all disappeared to. Her stomach was barely protruding at all.

“I get the feeling we’ll need to stop for supplies before we reach our destination,” Lapis said as she unfurled the map.

The overloaded donkeys were already looking a lot lighter after their first day camping. The animals seemed relieved, but at this rate, the party would undoubtedly run out of food by the next night. Unless they stopped at some town along the way, they wouldn’t even reach the ruins.

“All this running around really works up an appetite.”

“Mr. Loren, is this really all right?” Lapis asked, pointing at Gula, who had produced a toothpick from somewhere.

Loren had no answer for her. Even if he said it wasn’t, they couldn’t just abandon Gula in the middle of nowhere. Dumping her wasn’t a problem in and of itself, but there was no telling what trouble a dark god would make unsupervised.

“What else can we do? I can’t think of anything. For now, let’s decide our lookout shifts and get to sleep already.”

“Then let’s put Gula on for the whole night.”

“Hey, hold up!” Gula objected, spitting out her toothpick in the process. “Even

I'd like to get some sleep." Judging by her outrage, she seemed to think Lapis's suggestion was completely out of left field.

Lapis, looking none too convinced, asked her, "Do you even have to sleep?"

"I do! I'm a living being!"

"Haven't you already slept enough to rot your brain to mush? You should be fine going a mere four days without it."

"Wait, you don't even plan on letting me sleep a single day?!"

"You must work off what you eat."

Lapis made it sound so obvious, but Gula looked like her world was about to end. Knowing it couldn't continue like this, Tizona stepped in to mediate.

"Honestly, I can't tell if you're serious or not. But she'll die if she doesn't sleep for four days."

"She won't die. She'll just start hallucinating."

"Why do you feel the need to punish her? It's my wallet that's hurting, and I'm saying it's all right. Isn't that enough?"

Gula hugged herself tight and hung her head. Seeing that Lapis had no objections, Tizona produced an hourglass from her bag.

"When the last grain of sand falls, it will be one stound. There are four stounds until morning, so let's have one person take a stound each."

"Are we going to draw lots, then?"

"No, this is my proposal, so I will take the first shift," Tizona insisted. Thus the order started with her, then went to Gula, Loren, and finally Lapis.

Once that was decided, Gula latched onto Loren with enough enthusiasm to make a lie of her previous despondency. Loren had no time to dodge, and though he swung his entangled arm to free himself, she held on with both her arms wrapped around tight. It wasn't so easy to get rid of her.

"Then we're gonna sleep. Let's sleep together, Loren."

"What made you decide that?"

“Well, my sleepin’ bag’s a normal one, and yours is first-rate. I’d reckon it’d make a world of difference.”

Perhaps she was right, but that didn’t mean he would grant her wish. Not long ago, Gula had embraced him in a bed, and even that had been a bit much. If they were crammed together in a narrow sleeping bag, it would be hard to hold back.

But Gula wasn’t the sort to listen if he said no.

I’m only a man, Loren thought as he decided to try a compromise.

“Then you use my sleeping bag. I’m fine with a normal one.”

“That defeats the point. Hey, Loren. Let’s warm each other up. How about it?”



As Gula snuggled up to Loren, Lapis approached her from behind, stuffing a sleeping bag down on her head-first. In Loren's moment of shock, Lapis knotted a rope around the bag and sealed Gula within.

She won't be able to come out even for her shift, Loren thought as she watched Lapis shove the Gula-bundle into one of the tents.

Then, Lapis stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You're not thinking that was a waste, are you?"

"Hell no. You saved me."

Lapis's expression softened, and after she and Loren said their good nights to Tizona, she wormed her way into her own tent.

"Sorry, but when Gula's turn comes around, could you let her out? I know it's more work for you, but I don't think she can escape that on her own."

"G-got it..." Tizona stammered.

"Sorry about that."

Loren waved her off, then entered his tent.

He didn't have Gula's appetite, but a day's walking did tire him out a bit. Once he was tucked in, a gentle sleep was soon to follow.

Chapter 3:

Daybreak to Descent

IT WAS THE MORNING of the second day, and Lapis was squinting at the blinding sunrise. She sat in front of the fire, which had barely lasted through the night. Her bottom rested atop Gula, who was still bound and tied.

“What a refreshing morning.”

“I ain’t refreshed at all...”

“Then please learn already. I’m beginning to suspect you’re more lustful than gluttonous.”

There was, of course, a reason Gula remained bound. The dark god had aimed for the moment Loren’s watch shift was over and secretly snuck into his tent, only for Lapis to spot and apprehend her. Gula swore that she only wanted to try the feel of a first-rate sleeping bag, but it was almost guaranteed that her aim had been to sleep with Loren.

“Lust? I don’t want to be grouped together with that guy...”

“You’re pretty much the same, aren’t you?”

“We’re completely different! I might do this to Loren, but not to anyone else! Luxuria’s indiscriminate!” Gula protested, naming the dark god of lust they’d encountered on their last job.

This forced Lapis to recall the various troubles of that particular quest; suddenly, the morning lost all its refreshing qualities, and her face twisted up in a scowl. Despite being the dark god of lust, Luxuria had been an extremely muscular man with a feminine tone.

“Is that how it works?” she asked.

As long as the target was Loren, it didn’t matter to Lapis whether Gula was indiscriminate or not. However, with Luxuria, Lapis felt the greatest risk was a corruption that might reach Loren’s very soul. Perhaps Gula was a bit safer; even if Lapis did accidentally overlook the woman’s nonsense for a bit, the

fallout would be far less drastic.

A while later, Loren and Tizona were up. After exchanging pleasantries, Lapis promptly began preparing breakfast and lunch. The breakfast went without saying, and for lunch, it would be rather bothersome to have to stop and cook along the way. They were better off snacking while they walked.

For the morning meal, she made a simple stew of salted meat and vegetables completed with a pairing of bread. Then, she fried up preserved bacon with random vegetables, sandwiching it all between hard bread to save for later.

As she was wrapping up the finished product and tucking it away, Gula complained from her bindings. “Lapis, darlin’, that ain’t nearly enough.”

“You really intend to eat everything we have, don’t you?!”

For Loren, Tizona, and herself, Lapis had thought two per person would be enough. She had, in fact, made ten for Gula, but as far as Gula was concerned, even a dozen all to herself wouldn’t have been enough.

Lapis had wanted to leave at least a few supplies, but Gula wouldn’t listen when she told her to deal with it. Lapis had little choice in the matter, so she haphazardly cooked up the rest, preparing twice what she had. Gula still seemed unsatisfied but had to reluctantly agree; it was all they had left, after all.

“I’m going to get heartburn so early in the morning,” said Tizona.

Lapis replied, “I think you’ll have to get used to it.”

She distributed stew and bread to Tizona and Loren. After securing her own portion, she shoved the pot toward Gula, who had finally managed to wriggle free. The way Gula voraciously gobbled breakfast directly from the pot showed no hint of table manners. It was an appetite-ruining sight, and the rest of the party simply did their best not to watch.

The campsite was repackaged and the party continued on the second leg of their journey. It was around that point that the highways grew more dangerous. There were no large towns nearby. What’s more, their destination was as backwater as Waargenburg got. Naturally, there were fewer soldiers on patrol. This meant a higher chance of coming across bandits, thieves, and monsters.

“Normally, I’d tell everyone to proceed with caution,” Lapis tiredly muttered as a human burned to cinder before her eyes.

There was a flabbergasted scream as the man’s companions watched him burn, not that those flames seemed to care as they savored their sacrifice until only ash remained. Ash that blew away in the breeze.

“I think there’s enough of them to deal with a normal party of four.”

Loren’s greatsword howled as a swing cleaved straight through one man’s body, leaving only his lower half on earth. A torso clad in slightly grimy armor flew through the air as another’s head was pierced with a bolt of mana, splattering shards of red and pink onto those around him.

Lapis gazed at them with pity. “Ms. Tizona, can’t you be tidier about this? We can’t fish through their wallets if you reduce everything to ash.”

They had been attacked by ten-odd bandits. The thieves ambushed from a meager grove alongside the highway, but the party had noticed before the bandits even struck, and it was simply decided that pushing through was preferable to taking a detour. The whole affair was a tragedy straight from its onset.

“You’re expecting too much from bandits around these parts. I doubt they carry anything significant.”

“Any bit of coin you can scrounge will still lower your debt.”

“Hmm... How about this, then?”

Convinced by Lapis’s point, Tizona waved her hand. This time, the next bandit was only wrapped in flames from his neck up. The flames did not spread to the rest of his body, and once its head was ash, his corpse buckled at the knees and fell.

What remained was a clean, if not charred, cross-section. The result was far tidier than the thieves cleaved by Loren or blasted by Gula.

“So you can do it if you try.”

Then you should do that from the start, Lapis thought. Just because Tizona could burn everything, that didn’t mean she should. *If something’s usable, you*

should keep it usable. She looked at the mercenary with a rather unpleasant face.

“It’s a pain to aim,” Tizona replied as she turned another bandit into a headless corpse.

Lapis was quick to make her move. She rifled through the body’s pockets, came up with a few copper and silver coins, and handed them to Tizona.

“Are you sure I can take these?” Tizona asked, her eyes flitting between the coins and Lapis’s face.

“I believe our client has first pickings on what we find on the job,” Lapis lightly replied.

Though to be honest, it was a rather paltry sum, so Lapis decided to hand it to the person with the most financial troubles.

“I’m counting on you to do the same to any monsters we come across. We can’t strip off any materials if you turn them all to ash.”

Having fought mostly as a mercenary, Tizona evidently hadn’t put much thought into looting her foes or cutting pieces off of them.

“Come to think of it, Ms. Tizona. You don’t have a weapon, do you?”

Another body was launched high into the air. The sight of a body cleaved diagonally from the shoulder, spinning, splattering blood all around, had become quite common since Lapis took up with Loren. Though she was accustomed to it, that didn’t make it a pleasant thing to see.

With that in mind, Lapis glanced at Tizona’s hip. Though Tizona’s armor was fine enough, she seemed to have no weapons, and Lapis had to wonder if that was viable for the mercenary trade. Upon noticing Lapis’s gaze, Tizona tapped her hip.

“In my case, having no weapons is better if I want to fight seriously,” Tizona said with a chuckle.

Something seemed off, uncanny about that. It was common sense that even magicians wielded staves. Even if Tizona said that being completely bare-handed was for the best, everything Lapis knew refuted it.

“You’re a swordsman, aren’t you?”

At the very least, Tizona was dressed like one. She was wearing ornamented plate armor and probably wasn’t a magician.

Tizona held out her hands, manifesting a blazing sword in each. “If I can make them myself,” she said, “why would I need to carry them?”

“But you can’t exchange blows with those, can you?”

Meaning Tizona had no means to *not* kill her enemies.

As Lapis asked, the chest of a bandit about to attack her from behind vanished, his remaining limbs and head tumbling to the ground.

Glancing over her shoulder, Lapis noted a few tooth marks on the body’s cross-section and furrowed her brow. She glared at Gula. The dark god must have invoked her Predator authority. Noticing the stink eye she was receiving, Gula lowered her head apologetically.

I guess she couldn’t endure anymore, Lapis conceded. But things could get very messy if Tizona noticed.

“If we locked swords, my foe’s blade would be burned through.”

And as if to put those very words to test, Tizona met the axe of a bandit with the fiery blades she had created. The swords made contact, and then it seemed like they were sliding through one another with no resistance whatsoever. In a moment, the bandit’s axe fell to the ground, split in two.

The bandit looked down at his axe, unable to believe what he had witnessed. In this moment of negligence, Tizona severed his head. The wound was immediately cauterized, letting out not a drop of blood.

“That’s ridiculous. I sympathize with anyone who has to go against you.”

If what Lapis had just seen happened every day on the battlefield, that was all a bit much. Anyone who tried to take distance would be incinerated in Tizona’s flames with no way of defending themselves. Those that approached would be sliced with swords they could not block.

If she were able to exhibit her full abilities as a demon, Lapis would bet on being able to counteract it, but she could immediately tell there was absolutely

no way to combat Tizona as a mere priest. Lapis's only means of survival would be to throw in the towel.

"You sure are kind, sympathizing with bandits."

Was it really so strange to feel pity for those that were so thoroughly beaten down without any chance to resist? Lapis cocked her head. By then, the bandits she pitied were no more. Lapis offered a prayer to the bodies strewn across the road.

A town came into sight before the second night fell. Monsters and bandits had assailed them a handful of times along the way, but as Lapis said, any pity was to be saved for their attackers. The party suffered no damages whatsoever.

Perhaps this was to be expected of a party consisting of two mercenaries with epithets, even if one denied it, and an entity renowned as a dark god.

Lapis the priest did not utilize her demonic power. Since there was no one to heal either, she had spent the day doing a lot of nothing.

"It's getting dark already," Loren mumbled.

The sun was completely set by the time they arrived, and it was so dark, they would have been blind on the open road. It was at times like these that a town's light brought a sense of relief.

These very lights were paving the way to an inn when Loren voiced his worries. "Can we get a room at this hour?"

No room at the inn meant camping out nearby. The shops weren't open at this hour, and they had gone through nearly all their food supplies to satisfy Gula. This left them with nothing but a meager meal until morning.

"Well, I suppose that depends on how much we're willing to pay for it," Lapis said, sure that money would solve all their problems: a realistic outlook in most cases.

The station town they found themselves in was not particularly large; there was a high chance that the inn's normal rooms were filled with travelers. But perhaps the pricier rooms were still empty.

The problem was whether or not this town even had an inn with pricy rooms. But this too was a problem Lapis could solve with money.

“Worst case, we can offer to take a room off of a poor traveler.”

In short, they would negotiate and make a monetary offer. It was a drastic measure, but as long as money wasn’t an issue, they wouldn’t be left without shelter.

“I take no issue with camping in and of itself, but not having any food is a problem. Thanks to a certain gourmand,” Lapis said, quite sarcastically.

Gula replied, “Hey if we’re camping out and all, we can still rustle up some grub.”

Though a well functioning town, it was still quite small. Lapis was curious to know exactly how and where Gula intended to get groceries. It would be a huge bother if Gula hauled back something outrageous; the inn was quickly becoming necessary. Instructing Loren and the others to wait outside, Lapis chose out one of the town’s tiny handful of inns and went to have a talk with the proprietor.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re in luck or not, but we happen to ‘ave some openings,” the owner answered. He was a man who had barely passed middle age and just entered the ranks of the elderly.

Surely getting a room would be a good thing, but the way the owner put it left room for doubt.

“Why would it be unlucky?” Lapis asked, beckoning the others inside.

She briefly scanned the first floor of the inn, which also served as a dining hall. Although the place was lively with travelers who—given the hour—had gathered for dinner or a late pint of beer, looking a bit closer, she could spot a few empty tables dotting the dim interior.

I see, there really are vacancies, Lapis thought.

Gula, who had taken the donkeys to the stable, whispered to her, “The stable had a good few openings too.”

Given the lack of customers, Lapis feared she had chosen an inn with poor service, though the owner’s grumbles soon addressed this.

“Word has it a large-ish bandit troupe set up shop south of town. Not as many travelers coming and going from that direction these days.”

They were headed south after this.

“Are there that many bandits?”

For the time being, they had secured a room. Lapis slid a few coins over the table, which the owner took and counted as he answered, “Yeah, a few farming villages have gotten it real bad already. Quite a few of the soldiers stationed with them got done in too. The soldiers here think we might be next on the chopping block.”

“That’s a big deal then, isn’t it? Have you petitioned the crown already?”

“Course we have. Rumor has it they’re struggling, though.”

“Why would that be?”

“Well, there was a skirmish with our neighbor not so long ago. I heard they lost more soldiers than they should have, and they’re having trouble filling their ranks.”

This crisis wasn’t completely unknown to the party. In fact, a certain party member who happened to be well acquainted with the culprit was playing dumb, whistling and staring off into the distance.

Although the inn’s owner phrased it as if the army had faced casualties, not many had died in the war at all. To be more precise, certain circumstances led to quite a few not wanting to be soldiers anymore. Not that there was any point in explaining it to him.

“A war, is it? The world is a scary place,” Lapis said, trying to sound inoffensive.

The owner nodded several times with a troubled look on his face. “You got that right. Thanks to that, the bandits are having their way with us.”

“But where did they get enough people to form such a large threat?”

Bandits did tend to crop up all over the place, but that didn’t mean they appeared from thin air. The fact that there were so many people willing to turn to banditry meant they’d drifted in from somewhere.

“From here on south is no man’s land as far as the country is concerned. Escaped convicts, broke mercenaries, and deserters. Add that to failed settlers. They all got together to form one brigade.”

Loren’s face stiffened. He had been a broke mercenary himself but had been lucky enough to find work as an adventurer. Though he shouldered some debt, he still had enough to eat. But it wasn’t like every mercenary could be so blessed. Those who stepped off the path would naturally gather around those who shared their circumstances.

Perhaps one mistake would have led him somewhere similar. The thought had crossed his mind several times before.

“They say the country’s putting a policing force together, but who knows if that’s true. And if they can’t take those bandits down after all that, it’s pointless.”

“Are they really so numerous?” asked Tizona, a mercenary like Loren.

Perhaps she took it differently, as her company was still alive and well. But that stability would be put in jeopardy if she couldn’t pay her reparations and was forced to leave. She was, after all, the core of their fighting force. She possessed nonsensical levels of strength thanks to her gift.

“I don’t know the specifics, but there are quite a few of them. I mean, they took in all the surrounding bandits, apparently.”

“And that means they have someone capable of that.”

No ordinary person could take charge of such a large group. Having both followed competent leaders, Loren and Tizona knew this well.

It was only a matter of time before a group without a skilled, charismatic leader fell to division or collapse. Judging by the inn owner’s story, the bandits weren’t struggling with any of that. Whoever this leader was, they had managed to rally a force so great it warranted the country’s action.

“But if the group is that large, it should be impossible to hide where their base is.”

“That’s the thing. We still don’t know where they’re working from. If they’re

managing to hide that, their leader must have their wits about them.”

A flock of riff-raff was not much of a threat even if they did have the numbers. Once properly unified, it was a different story entirely.

The owner finished counting the coins and handed over the key.

As she took it, Lapis grumbled, “How bothersome.”

“Sounds like a pain,” Loren agreed. “Let’s hope we don’t meet them.”

“Well don’t you just have to crush them the moment you lock eyes?” Gula nonchalantly asked, but Loren and Lapis shared tight smiles.

With their party members, they wouldn’t lose even if they came across a considerable number of bandits. But that was only if everyone could fight at full strength. With Tizona around, Lapis couldn’t do anything too conspicuous, and they couldn’t eliminate the possibility of ambushes or other nasty, well-targeted attacks.

“I was the one who brought us here. You can count on my power if you want.”

“Good to know.”

Tizona, out of the entire party, was the only one Loren wanted unleashing her true power. *Now how far can we get if we make her the core of our unit?* Loren thought before realizing he was already making battle plans, like the bandits were inevitable. A bitter smile crossed his face.

“Anyways, we’re better off not seeing them. If we meet ’em anyways, we can think of what to do then. Not like we’re turning back now.”

“Yes, I need to reach my destination no matter what. That hasn’t changed.”

“So business as usual then. Forget about the things we can’t do anything about. Let’s get some rest.”

“Well, how about offering a prayer or two? There might be a god who’ll listen, you know,” Gula jokingly said, though this came off as a terrible punchline to Loren. He scoffed.

“You don’t believe in the gods, Loren?” Tizona asked.

Due to the nature of the job, many mercenaries were superstitious. Though they didn't count on any god to smite the enemy for them, a good number of them were religious.

"I believe the gods exist out there...but I don't really feel like praying to them for anything. I get the feeling nothing good will come of it. That's how I've started to think since becoming an adventurer."

Loren sent a rather meaningful glance to Lapis and Gula. A priest who brought up the god of knowledge as justification for every little thing and a woman called a dark god—both sent him rotten looks back.

Although Loren was perfectly fine with turning back now that they had learned a sizable bandit troupe stood between them and the ruins, Tizona's circumstances kept them from doing so.

After a night at the inn, Tizona insisted they set off as soon as they awoke, but Gula and Lapis stopped her.

"We haven't 'ad breakfast yet," Gula insisted.

The night before, after they had booked a room, they found out that the downturn in customers meant that the inn had not stocked as much food. What's more, they had arrived rather late and most of those supplies had already been offered to other travelers.

They managed to haggle for everything the owner had left, but this was, as expected, not nearly enough to satisfy Gula. She complained at length and only settled down when the owner said he would stock up at the morning market. Evidently, she was not going to move until she had eaten a proper breakfast.

"Breakfast aside, we still need to replenish our own food stock. There's still another two days to go, right? You're not going to tell us to pick up whatever looks edible along the way, are you?" asked Lapis.

Although Gula noted, "I'm actually fine with that."

Loren was concerned about the state of Tizona's wallet, but there was no telling what Lapis or Gula would come back with after being sent out hunting. *If*

we can have human food, we should prioritize it, he thought as he looked at Tizona. There was no way she got the message, but she still nodded reluctantly.

“Fine, fine. They say you can’t, err, something or another, on an empty stomach.”

Her expenses were stacking up, but she didn’t have much choice. She was well aware of this and her decision was swift. Swift enough to impress Loren. He was sure she would have been more apprehensive.

“Ms. Gula is a bit of an extreme example.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll work my hardest to make up for it.”

Gula didn’t sound too apologetic, and Tizona let out a deep sigh. With little else to do, Loren simply prayed that Tizona didn’t go bankrupt just yet.

The owner had remembered his promise from the night before and procured mountains of food from the market. He immediately got to work cooking breakfast for his residents. It was a daunting sight to many, but Gula waited for her meal with a smile. Lapis looked away, uninterested, while Tizona held her aching head.

If Gula’s going to be sticking around with us, we need to do something about her appetite, thought Loren.

As Gula made short work of unnerving amounts of breakfast, the rest of the party ate normal portions beside her. They left the donkeys with the inn as they headed to the cozy heart of the small town.

Selecting a random grocery store from the handful of shops tailored to travelers, they got to work heaping their baskets with any of the goods lining the shelves.

“Umm, err... You’re not going to pick and choose?”

Loren and Lapis were so casually arbitrary in their selections that Tizona simply had to ask.

“As long as we have the quantity, the rest will work itself out,” Lapis nonchalantly replied without looking up. “We can choose our portion from what we have and shove the rest onto Ms. Gula.”

“Is that okay with her?”

“It is. It doesn’t matter so long as it’s edible.”

That was a harsh way to put it. Unfortunately, it was also true, so Loren couldn’t retort. He silently continued to help out.

“Still, this is quite a poor selection,” Lapis muttered, turning a vegetable over in her hands.

Loren had no way of knowing which vegetables were good or bad, but according to Lapis, the quality of the goods here wasn’t the best. He picked up another vegetable, wondering if that was really the case, when the store owner came up to them to apologize.

“Our supply routes have been limited.”

“Is this about those bandits again?”

Farming villages would carry their produce through relay towns like this one on their way to larger cities. These halfway points would trade with them for food. Although Loren didn’t know how many large cities there were around Kaffa and where the farmers might be headed, a problem with a station town meant a problem with the farming villages in the area.

“Yeah, I hear they made a real mess. Their area of activity is spreading by the day. I’m sure they’ll be on us eventually if the army doesn’t make a move soon.”

“Are there any soldiers in town?”

“Of course there are. But not many of them. From what I’ve heard, if those bandits come at us full force, those soldiers’ll be nothing but bloodstains on the side of the road.”

The soldiers sent to the outer regions were not well trained. If they lacked manpower as well, it would be impossible for them to mount an effective defense against a legion of bandits with an overwhelming numerical advantage.

“If I could pack up shop and run, I would. But I don’t have the time or money, so I have to pray they keep away.”

“You have it rough,” said Lapis. Seeing as there were no better goods around, Lapis gave up and shoved the vegetable into her basket. “Do you see how much

we're buying?" she bargained. "Can't you knock down the price a bit?"

"Sorry, I really don't have the profit margins for that," the shopkeeper replied. Naturally, Lapis carried on haggling anyway.

Tizona watched on, aghast, while Gula slumped sluggishly against the wall. She didn't care about the price or quality as long as she had something to eat.

For the time being, it seemed they had obtained supplies. Loren decided to leave it all to Lapis and walked out. When he looked at the sky, it was nice and clear. It seemed like a fine day for travel.

It was at that moment that a girl's voice drifted through his head. *«Mister, are you aware of the phrase, speak of the devil?»*

The girl had gotten tangled up in some trouble and turned into a Lifeless King, the highest form of undead. Having lost her body, her astral essence lived on within Loren's spirit. Her name was Scena, and her words gave Loren a terrible feeling.

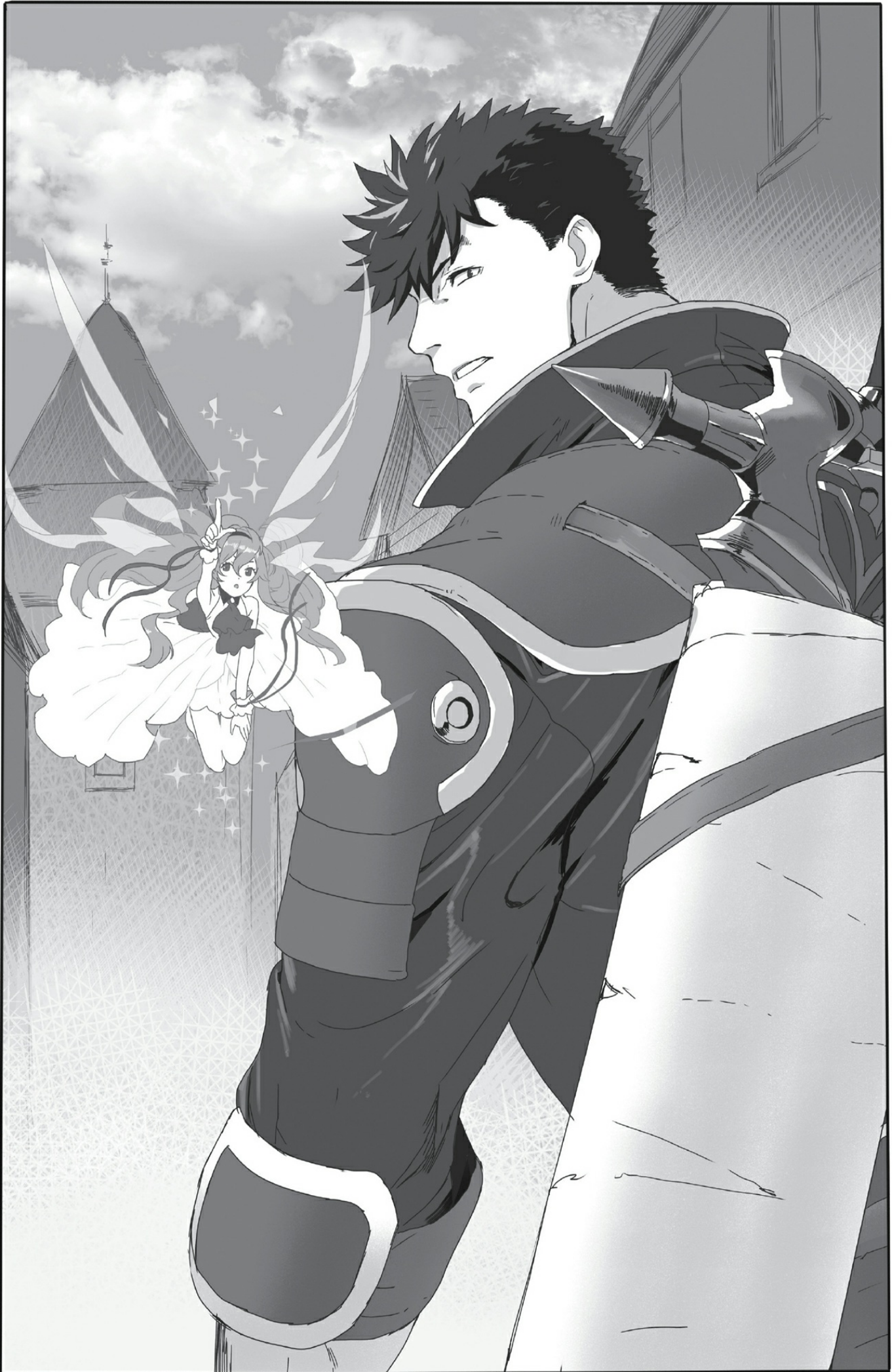
No clue what you're talking about. Unfortunately, I never went to school, he thought to her.

«To the right, and slightly back from where you're facing. Cardinal, to the south.»

As instructed, he turned in that direction. All he saw was the neighboring store, though he didn't quite know what goods they dealt in.

He cocked his head, wondering what Scena had picked up on. Had he overlooked something? He slowly scanned from ground to gable and even higher than that. It was only then that he spotted what she was warning him of.

A clear, blue sky. And, though faint, there was a gray streak that didn't seem to be a cloud. It was smoke.



“Something’s burning, but it ain’t coming from this town, by the look of things,” Gula said as she walked out of the store. She had noticed immediately.

If it had happened in town, then surely there would have been more of a ruckus, but few would notice anything going on so far away. Still, some of the residents did notice the smoke. Soon, they were walking out into the streets, pointing at the sky and warning the others.

“Not close, but not far either.”

The smoke’s colors weren’t intense enough for immediate danger, but the fact they could see it at all was proof it wasn’t far off.

“Right, right. I’d say it’s the town one over,” Gula estimated, forebodingly.

If someone had set the next town ablaze, it was most likely bandits. It would depend on how big an attack it was, but if those bandits didn’t pillage as much as they wanted from the neighboring town, there was a good chance they would continue their march to make up for it. The town’s guard, knowing this, was armed and suited up, running in the direction of the smoke.

“How does it look?” Lapis asked. She had cut off her negotiations the moment she noticed something off and paid a considerable sum for their supplies.

Behind her, Tizona shouldered a massive sack, having been tasked with carrying the bulk of their new stores. Though she was caught up in the doorway, she was trying her best to force her way through.

“We can’t tell from here,” said Loren.

There was still no guarantee it was a bandit attack, but Lapis spoke with conviction. They were better off expecting the worst, and so Loren quickly changed gears.

“Do you think we have time to return to the inn and get the donkey?” asked Lapis.

“That depends on their competence,” Loren replied. Though he thought to himself, *We should run while we can.*

If they were being actively attacked, it was better to sweep the sparks away before they became a fire. But otherwise, it was obviously best to make their

exit and leave this trouble to whoever's job it was to deal with these sorts of things.

Whether their opponent would allow them to or not was a different story, though. It was hard to imagine that these bandits would differentiate between his party and the townsfolk.

“For now, let's return to the inn and get ready to go,” Lapis proposed.

There was no point in panicking before they had a clear picture of the situation. Regardless, she thought they should prepare what they could as quickly as possible, and no one raised an objection.

Chapter 4:

Late Arrivals to Acceptance

HAVING RETURNED TO THE INN, Loren's party immediately made for the stable. Along the way, the inn's owner asked them what had happened, but they had no time to explain. They drove him off with vague answers and grabbed the two donkeys, but the situation took a turn before they could even get the beasts out of the stable.

"Ah, I'm gettin' a bad feeling," Gula said as she took the animals' leads.

Her eyes were locked onto smoke that was different from what they had seen at the grocer's. It was thick and black, practically flooding into the sky.

Whoever had made a mess in the distance hadn't been satisfied with the result—or perhaps they had planned this from the beginning. In any case, they were reaching further.

"Are we too late?"

"It really feels that way."

If someone had already launched an attack on the town, it was hard to imagine they would let the party slip away that easily. Especially not with the smoke rising from the south, where they were supposed to be headed. Leaving town meant waltzing right into the scene of the crime.

"Well, it's not like we can't use another exit and take a detour."

"Only if our foe is negligent enough to allow that."

If the enemy was numerous enough and competent enough, they wouldn't leave an opening for residents to escape. Of course, there was a chance that the enemy would be so caught up in their initial attack that they would be shorthanded elsewhere. However, given a small town with few exits, that was dangerous optimism.

"Even if the enemy is inept, we can't move very quickly in our current state. It's only a matter of time before we're found and surrounded," Lapis said,

looking at the two donkeys that hauled their once-again massive bags of supplies.

They had a rather haggard look about them, and they weren't fast animals in the first place. With everything they were carrying, they could hardly walk at all. It would be difficult to outrun anyone like this.

"Hey, how 'bout I take responsibility, and clean up—" Gula was about to say when Loren interrupted.

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

As far as Tizona was concerned, Gula's willingness to put up a desperate struggle was just her taking responsibility. In truth, it was quite likely Gula could handle herself, but Loren didn't know what impression that would leave Tizona with.

Of course, the promise, in this case, was a promise not to show such things to their client.

"Then at least let me check out the situation."

"How do you plan to do that?"

Loren's question went without an answer. Gula shoved the leads into Tizona's hands, then grabbed the wall of the stables they had just exited. She slickly clambered up the wall, the pillars, and finally onto the roof. Loren and Lapis watched helplessly while Tizona was taken aback.

"She's a magician, is she not?"

"It's a mistake to think all magicians are flabby wimps."

"Is that so?"

How was Loren supposed to answer that? Sure, the handful of magicians he knew couldn't climb up buildings with hardly any footholds. But if he admitted that, the question would become, "Then why can *she* do it?" and it was better to stay silent.

"No good, Loren! I can see fire rising in the south!"

From the roof, Gula gazed in the direction of the smoke. It seemed she was

high enough to make out what they couldn't from the ground.

"Guess we'll have to conclude it's an attack and act accordingly," Loren said.

"How unlucky can we be? Is anyone here on the wrong side of a god of misfortune?" Lapis asked.

For some reason, Tizona was flustered. "I-it's not me. I don't think so."

But Lapis, who made the allegation, obviously wasn't toting around a bad luck curse, and Loren didn't remember earning any such thing himself. The only possibility lay with the dark god watching the situation from the rooftop, but Loren didn't know the difference between dark gods and gods of misfortune. Could he even rope the two together?

"Specifically, what do you suggest we do?"

"Well, what else? We have to fight off our attackers. I don't know how many of the bastards are out there, but they should run home after we cut down thirty or so."

"If you're calculating backward from the amount needed to make their army retreat... You're expecting more than a hundred of them," Lapis said with a sigh.

From Loren's perspective, thirty was easy pickings. On the battlefield, slaying thirty men wasn't enough to influence a war in the slightest.

"Now, we decide who's gonna do it."

"Shouldn't we all go?" Tizona asked, and Loren looked at her hands.

Tizona was holding the donkeys' leads, with the fully loaded beasts trailing behind her. He had to wonder how she expected to fight like that.

"Someone has to look after our supplies."

"I can still fight."

Apparently, her gift was useful as ever even if she was rooted to the spot with her hands occupied. Not that this ensured the safety of the donkeys. She risked burning their beasts along with the enemy.

"Sure you can, but if those bags are burnt or broken, we have no way of resupplying. The girl up there's gonna starve."

Loren pointed at the roof, where Gula was watching over their conversation. If this really was a bandit attack, the shops would not be open once it was over. Then, without their bags, they would be held up in town, unable to complete Tizona's quest.

If there was time to spare until her payment deadline, then waiting until business restarted was an option, but no one knew how long that would take.

"Then what's your plan?"

"Tizona, you guard our bags. Lapis too. I'll handle this with Gula."

"That's probably for the best." Lapis agreed before Tizona could speak against Loren's plan.

It was too dangerous to take a priest like Lapis straight into death and destruction. But that didn't mean they could leave her alone to watch the bags. She necessitated a guard, and Tizona, who could take down multiple foes alone, was the prime candidate.

"Fine, I don't mind..."

"Then it's decided. Gula! You should know where they are now, so get down. We're going together."

"Got it. See? I do work for my food."

Once again, Tizona's eyes widened at Gula's nimble leap from the roof. Her landing was soft and soundless, almost like a cat's. Although Tizona doubted Gula's claims of being "just a magician," there was no time for an interrogation.

"Then we'll head out. Count on us."

"We'll be back when we're done, okay? Just lay low."

"R-right."

"I can treat minor wounds immediately. Take care, both of you."

Loren reached for the hilt of his greatsword, while Gula started off in the direction of the flames empty handed. As soon as they were out of sight, Tizona raised her guard. Perhaps the enemy would come from two directions at once.

"I do think those two can handle themselves, but is this really all right?"

It was hard to imagine the Cleaving Gale could be overcome by mere bandits, no matter how numerous they were. Of course, Tizona, as the Infernal Edge, was confident she could do the same, but she was still a bit anxious about sending two people to deal with a force great enough to raze a town to the ground.

“I imagine they will be just fine. And surely the town’s soldiers haven’t been totally wiped out, so they won’t be fighting alone.”

Surviving soldiers would lighten Loren’s burden and lower the chance of anyone taking him by surprise. Of course, if Lapis was being honest, a mercenary with an epithet and a dark god were kind of overkill for a hundred bandits. At least as far as Lapis was concerned.

“I’m more worried that we’ll run into the bandits that slip through.”

“Don’t worry. I shall take responsibility and protect you.”

Despite Tizona’s insistence, Lapis’s concern was mostly about Tizona herself. Her gift was slightly different from the pure ability to manipulate flames, but her means of attack were still fundamentally restricted to burning. Though this ability had proven its strength on the battlefield and the open plains, what would happen if she used it in town? *Roast* was fine, as it only affected a limited space, but if the enemies were too numerous, she would have to turn to *Heat*.

This was likely the reason Loren had taken Gula instead of Tizona. He didn’t take Lapis, of course, because she was supposed to be a priest—and should therefore be useless in fending off attackers.

“Anyways, let’s leave this to the two of them, and lay low here.”

Lapis put great emphasis on the last word. Though Tizona looked curious, she nodded.

“Can I get a bit serious this time?” Gula asked, sticking tight to Loren’s side as they ran toward the smoke.

Loren glared at her. “Of course not. Go easy. Go safe.”

“Then why’d you leave poor Tizona behind?”

This would be an easy victory if Gula fought seriously. But no matter how competent the bandits were, some of the town's soldiers might still be alive by the time Loren and Gula were done clearing the enemy.

He couldn't just let Gula devour those bandits with bystanders watching.

"I'll turn a blind eye to a bit of nonsense."

Still, as long as Tizona wasn't watching, he could at least play dumb. The dark god could cut loose a bit if she wanted.

"Then I guess I'll do a bit of light snacking."

This back and forth was cut short by their arrival at the south side. Flames rose all around them, and the ground was littered with corpses, likely soldiers from their armor. The bandits, successful in their attack and infiltration, slipped in and out of view, and their numbers caused Loren to stop and sharpen his gaze.

"This is getting ridiculous."

And who could blame him? The bandit attack had gone totally counter to his expectations.

"Ignore the guards! Just take the goods and leave!"

"No chasing the civilians either! If you've got time for that, get carrying!"

"Quit burning everything like bloody idiots! Burn the buildings, not the goods!"

They were clearly common thieves by the look of them, yet they went in orderly rank and file, carrying wave after wave of plundered goods. Loot was briskly packed and taken under the care of a handful of supervising thieves. The stolen goods were loaded onto wagons, and once a wagon was full, its driver would crack his whip and ride off, leaving an opening for the next wagon.

"Looks like the attack itself is over already," Gula mused, peering out from behind Loren. However, Loren was more put off by how trained and orderly the group seemed. Their discipline bordered on uncanny.

"What well-mannered bandits we have here," she added.

To attack, kill, steal, and raze. This was the workflow of the common bandit, but the bandits attacking the town were far from lawless maniacs. They were well practiced and controlled.

“What now?”

“What else...? They may be well-mannered, but what they’re taking still belongs to this town.”

Manners did not absolve thievery. Still, they were not what he expected, and Loren didn’t feel particularly compelled to stomp them down. He didn’t quite know what to do.

“Can I start gobbling, then?”

“Make sure you’re not seen.”

Taking this as permission to do as she pleased, Gula licked her lips and leaped past Loren. The attack was over, and the bandits were hard at work carrying their spoils. Though she didn’t have a weapon, Gula’s charge came as quite a surprise. In the next minute, the bodies of several bandits, not to mention the parcels they carried, fell prey to invisible fangs.

“What?! What happened?!”

“So there were still some soldiers left!”

The bandits now rushed about frantically like an ant’s nest poked with a stick. Loren watched from the shadow of a building, wondering whether Gula or the bandits were the real villains. Of course, there was no denying that the bandits were wrong for attacking a town, but as Gula chased them like a dog free from its lead, carrying out indiscriminate slaughter, she was certainly not the town’s savior.

“Dammit! The hell’s up with that woman?!”

“We can’t lift a finger against her!”

“Run! Prioritize the wagons! Abandon anything that hasn’t been loaded yet!”

Despite some confusion, their response was quick. Anyone who wasn’t trying to fight back immediately collected their things and hopped aboard a parked wagon, bolting like the wind.

The coordination left Loren quite impressed, but Gula was not one to let a fleeing foe escape from under her nose.

“At least leave the food!” she roared. The bolts of light unleashed with this war cry accurately shattered the wheels of the wagons.

Now, several vehicles with broken wheels bounced and rattled over the unevenness of the ground. Loren watched a few men take a tumble from them with his arm wrapped around the neck of a bandit who had spotted him and tried to attack; Loren destroyed the man’s cervical vertebra with a light twist.

The bandits thrown from their wagons managed to get up and ready their weapons in record time. At least, the lucky ones did, and the unlucky ones wound up too broken to lift themselves off the ground. However, Gula had given chase, and the ones who rose were torn to bits and swallowed into nothingness.

Eventually, Gula and Loren were the only ones left moving. Gula released her stance, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She turned to Loren, who had mostly remained a spectator.

“That’s that.”

“Good work. Any witnesses?”

“There were a few survivors from town, but I put them to sleep before we went at it. Any bandit that didn’t run away is dead.”

That so, Loren thought as he looked at his feet. A few bandits had attacked him while Gula was going at the rest of them. They hadn’t warranted his sword; he had snuffed their breath with his bare hands. He realized one of them was simply unconscious and so pressed down on his chest with a foot.

“Hey, hey, Loren. Since we got ’em back, those goods are ours, right?”

“Hell no. They go back to the town.”

Since they were stolen goods, an argument could be made that they belonged to whoever reclaimed them. Still, that would be an easier case to make if they’d recovered the goods from the bandit hideout. Loren wasn’t bold enough to claim them before they had even been taken anywhere.

“What, then I was doing charity work?”

“We’ll make sure they know they’re in our debt and get a reward one way or another. Just leave that to Lapis and we’ll do just fine.”

Though he said that, the soldiers who tried to fight off the bandits were mostly wiped out, and he didn’t even know who to negotiate with for that reward. *That’s also a job for Lapis then*, he thought as he returned his attention to the bandit under his foot.

The bandit’s features suggested he was in his late twenties or early thirties. A long career of banditry or something similar had left him with old scars all over. Though the man was unconscious, he looked vile even in his helpless state. His features would have brought a child to tears, and though he currently posed no threat, Loren knew what he had to do before the man awoke. He retrieved a rope off the ground—the bandits had been using them to bind their loot—tied the unconscious bandit’s hands behind his back, and slung him over a shoulder.

“Emergency rations?” Gula asked, realizing Loren was taking the man with him.

“Who’s gonna eat... Oh, right. You.”

“I’m willing to share.”

“Well, I’m not a cannibal. We don’t even taste that good, from what I’ve heard.”

His nonchalant response caused Gula’s face to stiffen. Apparently, that was not the answer she expected.

“Heard? From where?”

“A colleague of mine who was stuck in a siege. The enemy was using starvation tactics. He said he was willing to eat anything at that point...but that’s beside the point.”

Loren screwed his face at the pungent stench coming from his prisoner. The smell of sweat and grime among other things. *Ever heard of hygiene?* he thought. But hygienic bandits were a rare commodity regardless of location, and even thinking so was a waste of time.

“You see any hiding places? This won’t take long.”

“Then how about behind that busted warehouse?”

Loren swiftly headed in the direction Gula had pointed her chin toward. She tagged along, curious about what he was going to do, but Loren paid her no mind as he placed down the bandit, leaning him against the warehouse wall. Seeing the item Loren produced from inside the front of his own jacket, she could imagine what was going on.

It was a knife.

As he held the drawn blade in his right hand and slapped the unconscious bandit’s face with his left, Gula asked him, “Are you chopping him up? That’ll get pretty messy.”

“That depends on how stubborn he is.”

Once the bandit’s eyes cracked open, Loren made sure the knife was in his line of sight and squatted down beside him.

With a hazy head, the bandit struggled to understand the situation he found himself in. He looked around blankly until finally he realized he was bound with Loren brandishing a knife in his face. This realization came with a short shriek.

“Don’t make a ruckus. If anyone comes over here, I’ll have to finish you off on the spot.”

Loren pressed the knife blade against the man’s face, the cold steel snapping him to reality. His complexion went grayer by the second.

Satisfied with his reaction, Loren drew his face a little closer and whispered, “Now then. I don’t want to waste too much time with you, and I don’t want to dirty my hands either.”

What would happen next? The bandit could imagine the inevitable but desperately did not want to believe it. He stared at Loren with pleading eyes, but the former mercenary seemed unperturbed.

“For starters,” Loren continued, “how about I show you exactly what I’m gonna do if you fail to answer my questions?”

“S-stop it. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know!”

“I hope you’ll tell the truth, for both our sakes. But I’ve got no time to check your story. There’s a little thing I’m gonna do if you lie or stay silent. Going through it once beforehand should make this nice and easy, right?”

The knife pressed against his face slowly slid above his lips. His eyes were teary, his head trying to shake in a plea to put an end to it all, but he was fixed in place with the herculean might of Loren’s left hand. Only stifled, intermittent groans escaped his mouth.

“I ain’t too good at it. I’m not a specialist. But hey, it does the job. You’ll have to be patient with me.”

The blade tore through the bandit’s lip. There was a muffled scream and the bandit flapped his legs, but Loren’s weight on them meant the man could offer no resistance.

Gula had to put in her two cents. “Wow... You know how to do some nasty stuff.” She covered her face with her hand, but made sure to watch everything through the gaps in her fingers.

“In hindsight, working with the grunts gets you nowhere. It’s plain inefficient,” said Loren, afterward.

They had stopped by a well along the way for him to wash the gorey stains from his hands with a cloth he ripped off the bandit’s clothing. Gula watched with a slight frown.

They had managed to chase off the bandits that attacked the south side, but their foes’ swift and orderly retreat had circumvented any significant wins on either side. Tallying up their gains, they had forced the bandits to give up about half their plunder, and Gula had slain a dozen or so members.

The man Loren captured still drew breath when he was handed over to the town.

Of course, Loren had made him a bit more talkative, but after he’d spat out the necessary info, he was left with nothing but hollow laughter. He was no longer in any state to offer information to the soldiers or anyone who might interrogate him after that, but Loren had no interest in what became of a

bandit.

“He didn’t have any decent intel. Though I didn’t feel like he was lying either.”

“I’d be impressed if he was lying after what you did,” Gula said with a shudder.

What is this dark god on about? Loren thought. But there was a bit of fear in the way she looked at him now, and with the way she shook, perhaps she really was being sincere.

“Was it that brutal?”

This question came from Tizona. The party had gathered in a dining hall on the town’s untouched north side, different from the inn they’d stayed at the night before. After fighting off the bandits, Loren’s party was ultimately held up—mostly to give an explanation of what happened.

Gula hated such troublesome things, while Loren and Tizona weren’t confident they could properly explain even if they tried. Thus, Lapis went alone to speak with the surviving soldiers and the town’s higher-ups, and the rest of the party waited for her return.

“Brutal doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“That’s common sense where I’m from,” Loren claimed. “A tried and true way to get info from enemy soldiers.”

Gula shot a glance at the other mercenary, and as soon as Tizona realized Gula was looking at her, she hurriedly waved a hand in front of her chest.

“I’m not really...”

“It’s not common, right?”

“In most cases, I am in charge of the offense. There’s someone else who handles the prisoners... I don’t actually know how they are treated.”

“Well, that’s not a job they’d give to the Infernal Edge, after all.”

But they’re giving those jobs to the Cleaving Gale? Thought Tizona. But even if she brought it up, Loren would just deny his epithet again, so she kept her smile vague.

Noting Tizona's reaction, Gula tried to change the topic, "Right, what info did we get again?"

"Nothing too useful," said Loren. He knew there was no point in going caught up in a debate about the treatment of prisoners.

"Doesn't matter. Go on."

"First, the bloke I caught was at the bottom of the barrel. Lowest you can get in their organization. Didn't know a thing about where their main headquarters was."

That wasn't too rare in organized crime. But it was also evidence that the bandit troupe was large enough that its lowest members were never told about their HQ.

"The guys that attacked today are from one of their depots. They've got a few of those. They take anything they steal to a depot, then only the real valuable stuff gets sent to their headquarters. That's how it's set up."

"I've never heard of bandits operating like that before," Tizona said, and Loren had to agree.

Most normal bandit organizations—though that was a strange way to put it—would carry everything to their singular home base. Dispersing the loot meant dispersing their manpower and defenses.

"And ain't it strange they only send the valuable stuff? Don't those bandits just shove everything into their pockets?"

"I thought so too, but I trust what our captive had to say. Anyways, a transportation crew comes from their base to appraise their haul, and they only take a small portion of it. The depot gets to do whatever they want with the rest."

"Sounds fair to me."

"A fair bandit brigade?"

Loren and Gula argued while Tizona cocked her head. Soon enough, Lapis returned from giving her report. She looked a bit fatigued, but once she spotted the party, she placed a drink order and walked over.

“You look tired. Any results?”

Lapis held up her hand to cut off the question. She waited for the shopkeeper to bring her the drink first.

Shouldn't the report come first? Tizona wondered. But Loren had pushed all the trouble onto Lapis and didn't feel like pestering her if she wanted to wait.

Soon, the shopkeeper came and Lapis took a long swig. Then she gave a deep sigh, turned to the rest of the party, and gave her report.

“The results are tepid, to say the least. Thankfully, they were very understanding people.”

Perhaps handing over the prisoner had played a large part. The higher-ups and the soldiers easily believed that Loren and his party had been the ones to drive the bandits away, giving their thanks and promising a reward in the same breath. As a matter of fact, Loren was a bit concerned that they were being careless, but Lapis spoke to the contrary.

“Instead of arguing and losing the goodwill of an ally, it's better to accept it and seek their cooperation. I believe that's what they're going for.”

“Hey, we can't help if they want us to defend the town. We're in the middle of our own job.”

The top priority was still Tizona's quest to investigate the ruins. Fighting off the bandits was merely a detour. They would have to decline any further calls for assistance.

“I'd agree with you there. But I thought Ms. Tizona should be the one to decide here.”

“Me?” Tizona pointed at herself.

Lapis nodded. “Yes, you are our client, after all. There is no one better to decide our objectives.”

“What do you want me to decide?” Tizona said, calmly facing her. She seemed quite convinced by Lapis's point.

Lapis wrapped her hands around the mug, every inch the straight-backed and solemn priest as she gazed back. “The town's quest, or rather their request.

They were wondering if we could do something about one of the bandit depots.”

“By something, what does that mean specifically?”

“Something is something. If we’re being greedy, it would mean completely crushing it. Otherwise, doing enough damage that they have to lay low for a while, I’d assume.”

“Hmm...” Tizona folded her arms and thought.

Loren’s expression didn’t change, Lapis furrowed her brow, and Gula looked a bit surprised.

“Hey, shouldn’t you have an immediate reply there?” asked Gula. “There ain’t no way we’re doing that, right?”

“We don’t have a full understanding of these bandits... But it is within our capabilities, correct?” Tizona asked.

At first, Gula feared that Tizona had caught on to either her or Lapis’s true abilities, but then realized that the mercenary was referring to herself. Tizona believed she could handle it with her strength alone.

“Loren and Gula thinned their numbers a bit during the attack, and we know where the depot is thanks to that captive.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I would hesitate if they wanted us to do something about the headquarters. But as long as you discount the time loss, one depot is nothing.”

“You’re amazing, Ms. Tizona,” Lapis said without exaggeration; Loren choked on his drink.

Lapis and Gula looked at him curiously, but he waved his hand to say it was nothing. He had never expected such a compliment to come out of Lapis’s mouth, but that was hard to say to her face. Whether she realized that or not, she dropped the matter.

“But we are not in any position to waste time. They should understand that.”

“Then how about I fill you in on something nice,” Lapis said, placing her cup

on the table. She stuck up one finger as she went into the reward. “If we fulfill this request, then on top of the town’s reward, we’re allowed to do anything we want with all the loot at the depot.”

“How generous.”

Usually, if a client requested a retrieval, then the right to the stolen goods went to that client. If they attacked the depot without accepting a request, then ownership would fall directly to them. These terms did not usually overlap. However, the town did have the right to set the terms at both a reward and free pickings from the depot.

Ignoring the overwhelming number of bandits, it was an incredibly lucrative job. However, it came with some unavoidable difficulties. The depot and all its loot would not be accessible until they took care of every last bandit.

“If I said I would do it, then what would your response be?”

“That depends on what we get out of it.”

Though it was up to the client to decide their objectives, the adventurers were still free to decide if they were on board or not.

“An additional gold coin per person,” Tizona conceded. “How does that sound?”

Her question was posed to Lapis, but Lapis looked to Loren in turn. Tizona was the client and Loren was the party leader. He would be the one to make the final call.

“Do you have the time?” he asked.

“If reclaiming the goods took seven or eight days, that would pose a problem.”

“It won’t take nearly that long.”

“Then it’s no issue. Will you accept?”

“Well, I wonder.”

Lapis had left the decision to him, but what about Gula? He looked at her to see her yawning, completely uninterested. Once she’d closed her mouth, she

noticed the look Loren was giving her; she perked up for a moment, then noticed he was seeking her opinion. She nodded twice.

Evidently, Gula was also entrusting him with the decision.

Loren turned back to Tizona and answered. "Why not. We'll take those terms."

"Good, then we'll need a map of the surrounding area. Then we can discuss the plan."

But Lapis already had one prepared. They didn't have to move a muscle as she spread a map of the area over the table.

Chapter 5:

From an Attack to a Rummage

COMPARING THE INFORMATION Loren had drawn from his captive with Lapis's map, it soon became clear that the bandit depot was a day away by foot. It was in the mountains, only a stound's travel on horseback.

In the interest of saving time, they haggled with the town to borrow horses. Unfortunately, there weren't enough mounts for the whole party. Thus, they had to settle for a fast horse and sturdy wagon.

"It would be far easier if I could just burn the whole place down," Tizona muttered something ominously as the wagon rattled over the road. Loren was in agreement and could make no argument.

However, though that method would technically fulfill the town's request, it would leave the party with meager rewards. The goods in the depot happened to be one of their objectives. Unless they kept fires to a minimum, most of those goods would be reduced to cinders.

"I can't eat them if they're..."

"Yes, you can. Shut up."

Loren clapped a hand over Gula's mouth before she could say something even more incriminating.

Tizona watched their banter with a tilt of her head, while Lapis looked back resentfully from the cabman's perch. Someone needed to steer the wagon, but there weren't any drivers in town willing to launch an attack on a bandit organization. This left Lapis, but she couldn't shake the feeling she had pulled the short straw.

"It looks fun back there..."

"Yes, surprisingly fun," Gula sincerely answered.

Lapis hadn't expected a reply. In fact, she was so surprised that she failed to guide the horse around the next bend, causing the wagon to lurch precariously.

Even that was a blast for Gula, and Loren thought for a moment that it had been the right decision to let her into the party.

The wagon was approaching the mountains. They traveled slower than a free-running horse, but far faster than their feet could carry them. This allowed them to arrive before sunset.

“A fine time for a raid, ain’t it?” Loren muttered. They stopped the wagon a short distance from where the captive claimed the depot was.

The reddened sun was already on its way out, and the curtain of the night would soon descend upon them. On Loren’s suggestion, they would attack under the cover of darkness.

“Do you have a plan?” Lapis asked as she tied the horse to a tree.

The answer came not from Loren, but Tizona. Based on their intel, there would be just about a hundred bandits at the depot. Lapis had thought this would be a bit much for the four of them, but Tizona didn’t seem to share the sentiment.

“The plan,” she said, “is fire. I will attack from the front.”

“That’s... All right. What happens after that?”

Although Lapis considered complaining, Tizona did say she had a plan. She decided to hear this Infernal Blade out to the end.

“I will engage in a flashy fight and draw their attention. Taking advantage of this, your party will sneak into the depot and cause confusion from the inside. With attacks coming from both within and outside, I imagine the bandits will be squashed in good time. What do you think?”

“So you *have* put some thought into it.”

It was a surprisingly sound course of action, though Tizona sounded a bit offended by the compliment. *If that’s how you feel, then don’t just suggest burning any and everything*, Lapis’s expression seemed to scream. Not that Lapis said anything out loud. Tizona ignored her and turned to Loren for his opinion.

“I don’t think it’s too bad,” he conceded. “If I had to point out a problem...”

“Well, we’re pretty bad at the whole sneaking thing.”

“And unlike you, I’m dead if I’m pitted against a bandit army on my own.”

“You are?”

Loren glared at Gula, whose reaction made him seem foolish. As far as Loren was concerned, he spoke from the heart. Yet, Tizona turned the exact same dubious gaze upon him.



If he really did have to fight an army, he would get tired eventually. At least, that's how he saw it. They had only managed to fight off the bandits in town because he had Gula, a dark god who defied all common sense, to watch his back, but the others obviously didn't see it that way.

I don't want to get their hopes up, he thought as he cleared his throat. "I guess we can still get pretty far if Tizona keeps them distracted."

"Right," Gula added. "We can just crush them if they find us."

"We're all quite terrible at secrecy and covert operations, as it turns out," concluded Lapis.

They exchanged a look. Almost in unison, everyone apart from Loren let out a sour chuckle. They were all aware of this without Lapis having to point it out, and they could only try to laugh it off.

"Very well, I shall start my frontal assault."

"Then we'll take a detour and see what we can do from the back."

So Tizona walked off in her chosen direction alone, cracking her fingers. After seeing her off, Loren's party got a move on as well, as quietly as they could. They chose a route that would lead them to the back of the depot.

Some time later, a red-haired woman in gaudy attire appeared before the depot. These bandits were using it as a base, so it was built like a fort, surrounded by a wooden fence with two men stationed at the gate as lookouts.

"Hey, someone's coming," one of them said as soon as he noticed her.

Though his tone was doubtful, given that their intruder had come alone, he picked up the bow he kept to one side. The other lookout picked up on his comrade's wariness and readied his own bow.

"Did that town send someone to get revenge?"

"They wouldn't send just one person."

The bandits had launched attacks on nearly all the surrounding settlements. Naturally, the gatekeepers had been informed of their cohort's failure to properly subdue a station town outside their usual hunting grounds.

The survivors claimed they had been ravaged by only one (some claimed two) enemies, but none of their companions back at base really believed that. Even if the woman walking toward them in no particular hurry reminded the lookouts of that story, their hearts were still filled with doubt.

“Who cares how many there are? Just shoot.”

“You have a point!”

They decided to act without getting bogged down by complicated thoughts. Surely the woman had noticed them, but her pace didn’t change as they fired their arrows.

Two arrows, fired quite passably by bandit standards, flew on course to pierce through the woman’s body. The lookouts smiled as they imagined her falling to the ground bathed in red, but their faces soon froze over.

The woman neither defended nor dodged. She simply walked straight ahead, yet just before the arrows reached her body, they burst into intense flames and scattered as ash.

“Huh?”

“What was that?”

Wailing cries escaped the bandit’s lips as they were left unable to understand or believe what had happened before their very eyes. Meanwhile, the woman—Tizona—stopped with a fearless smile on her face. She beckoned to them, a clear taunt.

As it so happened, the lookouts had not a shred of patience for this. Blood rushed recklessly to their heads, and they raised their voices in return.

“I don’t get it, but she’s mocking us!”

“Hey! Get out there, boys, and shoot her dead!”

The bandits who answered the call appeared in droves, each nocking an arrow aimed at Tizona. They unleashed their shots in a chaotic chorus, totally out of sync, but that still left a considerable number of arrows raining down on Tizona from above. Not a single one reached her body. Each burnt to ash in a split second.

Most of the bandits' arrows had been used up by the time they got the message: their attacks were pointless.

"Wh-what's her deal?!"

"Hey, you, get some reinforcements..."

Their bows and arrows proven useless, they tried to call on more manpower, but this decision came too late. Once the rain of arrows had ended, Tizona bolted straight at them. The charge of an unarmed woman startled a few of them, but among them were men who had experienced their fair share of battle.

They threw down their bows, each lifting up a sword or axe—and the moment they were ready to intercept her, the body of one bandit burst into flames. It came with no warning whatsoever. In his daze, the burning bandit was thoroughly charred, and that was far from the end of it. Immediately, another bandit was wrapped in fire. He was reduced to ash without even the chance to scream. Then the next, and then the morale of the bandits—which hadn't been too high in the first place—fell to pieces.

"What is this?! What happened?!"

"I don't know, but she's bad news!"

"Isn't it magic?!"

As they screamed, the bandits fled inside the gate and shut it before she could get any closer. Their instincts told them they would be safe as long as they closed the gate, but to Tizona, their wooden walls might not have existed at all.

She shifted from *Roast* to *Heat*, brandishing her hand high.



With a loud cry of, “Let’s put on a show!” that hand was lowered. A tidal wave of raging flames surged out, unregistered by the bandits who huddled in hiding from the woman they’d attacked. They lost their lives, burned gate and all.

The flames that cleared away the gate and several bandits spread to the wooden fence surrounding the depot. It glimmered a brilliant red against the darkness of night.

“Looks like it’s started,” Loren muttered as he saw the fire from the opposite side of the stronghold.

Taking that as the signal, Lapis tried walking toward the back door, but Loren grabbed her by the shoulder.

“We’re not going?”

“We’ll infiltrate from the side gate. I doubt every single bandit went to check out the fire.”

“I do agree with you there...but couldn’t the same be said for the side, then?”

“Yeah. So we’re going to change that,” Loren answered. He tapped Gula on the shoulder and pointed at the back gate. “Go wild.”

“Leave it to me!”

Gula enthusiastically accepted her orders. Before Lapis could stop her, she was running at the gate on the opposite side from Tizona’s.

Gula bounded toward her goal with such force that, at first, the lookouts didn’t know what was happening. In an instant, their upper halves vanished as if gulped down by some massive beast, and their bottom halves soon followed.

Seeing the gate gouged out by that very same force, Loren patted Lapis on the back, knocking her out of her stupor.

“With this much of a ruckus, the side gate should be shorthanded. Let’s go.”

“This is a tragedy, plain and simple... Not that I sympathize with them.”

Still, Lapis looked at the high flames, and at Gula who had finished with the gate and begun to eat the fencing, and she wondered: Between the ones burned and ones eaten, who had it better off?

Looking at the result, this is a bit excessive to take out a single bandit stronghold, Loren thought.

With their front gate assailed by Tizona's flames, and the back by Gula's gluttony, it took no effort for Loren and Lapis to infiltrate through a side door. The bandits were no longer a united front, and they could no longer put up an organized resistance. Rushing around without orders or sense, they tried to challenge their foreign invaders and wound up as ash or in the stomach of an invisible force.

"Don't kill them all. Leave the important-looking ones."

Tizona was one thing. But if Loren hadn't hammered that point home, an unleashed Gula would have gleefully devoured every last one of them.

"How am I supposed to tell if they look important?"

"The ones that have fattened up or have better equipment. You should know 'em when you see 'em."

"They all look the same to me."

"Then those guys who don't come out to fight us. The ones hiding in the back."

"I guess I can manage that, then."

Gula picked out the bandits who looked relatively polished; without lifting a finger, she rendered them unconscious.

At this, Loren anxiously wondered if Gula's powers could be explained away by simple magic, but Lapis was more knowledgeable about that, and she didn't seem very bothered. Tizona was the one they'd be explaining things to, and she was too focused on her own battle to watch Gula. Perhaps they could just play dumb if she didn't bring it up.

Incidentally, Loren never even drew his sword. There were a few bandits who saw him and attacked, but they were weak enough that his bare hands sufficed. Lapis stuck close to him and didn't get involved in a single scuffle herself.

It wasn't long before the sounds of combat began to fade, and finally, there

was silence. Only the half-carbonized wreckage and the countless marks of massive fangs gnashing against the earth remained. The buildings, thankfully, had been mostly untouched.

Although there should have been around a hundred bandits at the depot, only a dozen or so remained in the aftermath. *I doubt many were able to run away either*, Loren thought as he took in the scene.

Even if some did get away, there wouldn't be enough of them to form an organized force. They would either join another depot or the main base, or they would die in a ditch somewhere. There wasn't much use in dwelling on it.

"You told me to leave them, so I did. What do you want to do with them?" Gula asked, holding up a magic light.

The remaining bandits weren't restrained, but Gula had sent them into a deep sleep by taking a bit out of their minds and leaving them unable to maintain any awareness. Apparently, they would remain down until Gula returned what she had taken or enough time passed for them to recover naturally.

Gula had done the same thing to Loren before. Though he only had a vague understanding of the effects, the effects had overtaken his body.

"Interrogate 'em, of course."

The answer was rather obvious. The town's request had been to damage the depot enough that they couldn't launch another attack, and they had completed that task handily. By now, the party could leave and call it a job well done, but they had a destroyed depot to rifle through, and Loren thought they might as well get some information on the bandit HQ.

"You're doing that again?" Gula asked with a shudder and a grimace.

Loren shook his head.

He had indeed interrogated a bandit for the depot's location, but he was a former mercenary and an adventurer. Torture was not his forte. Torture usually meant inflicting immense pain on one's victims, but it also chipped away at the stamina and spirit of the torturer. There were those who loved tormenting others, and they were the exception. Unfortunately, Loren was not one of them.

In short, Loren wasn't feeling up to it.

For the time being, he randomly picked out one of the survivors and bound him tightly with a rope. After checking a few times to make sure the bandit was completely immobile, he placed him on the ground and urged Gula to wake him up.

"I don't like where this is going," Gula muttered as she regurgitated some chewed-up power back into the bandit.

Once he was awake, it took a while for the man to understand his situation. He looked around with hollow eyes and tried wriggling free of the ropes. Eventually, his mind caught up to him and he thrashed like a hornworm.

"Bastards!" he wailed. "Do you think you can just do this to me and get away with it..."

"We do. Can't you tell?"

Loren stabbed the tip of his boot into the man's stomach, sending him into a coughing fit. Then, he grabbed the man's head, lifting him up to see the half-standing remains of the depot.

Confronted with reality, the bandit was speechless.

"Looks like you get it now."

"How the hell did you guys...?"

"We're asking the questions here," Loren bluntly informed the man before tossing him head-first at the ground. Loren thought it had been just a light toss, but the bandit's body thudded dully to the ground.

Although the wound wasn't too deep, head injuries bled freely, and the bandit groaned in pain as red dribbled down his face.

"Now there's just one thing we want to know. Where's your headquarters?"

"What's knowing that gonna do for you?"

Loren slammed the bandit's head down again, a little harder this time. The shallow wound opened wider as forehead met dirt. The blood flow worsened.

"We don't take questions here. Just answer when asked."

“Can’t say. I’ll be killed.”

Loren’s second act of violence shook the bandit up a little; he was trembling as he answered. Loren slammed him to the ground again.

“That’s not an answer. If you wanna die, just say so. It’s not like we have to get that answer from you. If you’re dead, we can use your body to get the next guy talking.”

The bandit’s wound tore wider. Blood streaked wetly down his face. The last impact had broken his nose, and it was now slightly crooked. His lips were swelling and a whistling breath escaped the gaps between them.

“Where is your headquarters? Say it,” Loren asked once more.

After all, if the bandit couldn’t speak for fear of death, that meant he had an answer. If he didn’t know anything, he would have said as much. The bandit had already given himself away, whether he knew it or not, so Loren wasn’t being unreasonable. With the whiff of a lead, he had to pursue it.

“Speak, and we’ll turn you over to the authorities. Keep quiet, and you’ll be greeting the ground again. We’d all love to see how many shots you’ll take.”

“Then I die either way! Save me!”

Bandits who conspired to attack towns and villages were almost always sentenced to death. Occasionally, they would become slaves forced to labor in the mines, but those ones would be worked to the bone and their last breath. It was all the same punishment in the end.

In short, the bandit’s death was certain the moment he was handed to the authorities. All they could offer was the difference between an easy death or one at the end of a painful interrogation.

If he stayed silent, Loren would kill him. There was no doubt about that. He pleaded with Loren, trying to evoke as much pity as he could with his voice, but Loren wasn’t the right person to turn to.

“That’s your fault for being a bandit. Give up. If you tell us where your base is, I’ll put in a good word to the authorities. I’ll say you were very cooperative.”

But even a shining reference would do little to change his future. At least,

Loren had never heard any stories of a bandit's life spared because they cooperated. Not that Loren was going to tell this one that.

"A-are you being honest?!"

"Yeah, though they'll be making the final call. I don't know what will happen to you."

"I'll speak. I'll speak, so can't you just let me go?"

A cunning smile crossed the bandit's face; Loren considered his options. The party might receive reward money if they turned him in, but it would be an insignificant sum. Ignoring the reward and instead turning a blind eye to a survivor in exchange for information wasn't a terrible deal.

But Loren shook off the thought. "No can do. Give up. You made a mess for others and it's time to pay the piper."

"Dammit..." the bandit cursed. With his body bound, he had no chance of escaping Loren's grasp.

"So, what will you do?"

The bandit scrambled to think of a new plan for his survival, but he couldn't come up with some miracle solution.

A while passed. After Loren got the information he was looking for, he asked Gula to knock the man out again. Then, he began to tie up another bandit.

"What are you going to do with him?" Lapis asked.

She thought it was over and done with, but Loren lay the bloody, wounded bandit in eyeshot of the newly bound man and asked Gula to wake the next prisoner.

"We need to verify, right?"

Once roused, the next bandit reacted much like the first. He looked around with hollow eyes and began to thrash at the sight of his fallen, bloody comrade. Naturally, he could barely move a muscle.

"Finally awake? Then I have a question for you. Where is your headquarters? Be quick with it."

Loren drew the first bandit's bloody face closer and closer, implying that they could get a real concussion party started.

Bleeding from the forehead and unconscious, the first bandit looked practically like a corpse. The crooked nose and swollen lips on his face made it clear something terrible had happened to him, and the second bandit went paler by the second.



“This is getting pretty strange,” Loren said after his interrogation.

Tizona, Gula, and Lapis nodded at this. The opinion was universal.

Ultimately, Loren had put each survivor through a similar interrogation. Using the information gathered and Lapis’s map, they had pinpointed the general location of the bandit headquarters.

The reason they found it so strange boiled down to that general location.

“No matter how you slice it...”

“Ain’t that where Tizona said the ruins were?”

Lapis and Gula stared hard at the map, and both pointed at a single spot. It matched up perfectly with Tizona’s undiscovered ruins.

The bandits all said they didn’t know much about their headquarters, so the details were still hazy. As for why their base was around the same location as the ruins, there were roughly three possibilities.

“In the case that the bandit base and the ruins are separate,” Lapis said, holding up one finger as she got her thoughts in order. “if there really are undiscovered ruins there, then it isn’t so unnatural to think that some men of the bandit profession set up a base nearby to excavate.”

Even if they didn’t know exactly what was inside, anyone could determine untouched ruins at a glance. If they had even the slightest idea of how valuable those un plundered depths could be, they couldn’t just turn their backs on it, even considering the risks of graverobbing.

“That means we’ll have to rob the place while the bandits are in the middle of robbing the place,” said Loren.

Ruins were already dangerous enough. They sometimes had guardians, and dangerous monsters sometimes settled in them. Adding bandits to the mix would make it a far more perilous and bothersome ordeal.

“The second possibility is that the ruins themselves are the bandit lair,” Lapis said, adding her middle finger to her outstretched index finger.

Tizona presented a question: “Can something like that happen?”

“Ruins are rarely left in pristine condition, and if one portion collapses, it’s often that monsters get in and make a home there. If monsters can live there, I’m sure bandits can too. Probably.”

So we’re grouping bandits with monsters now, Tizona mused. Granted, both groups were incredibly troublesome.

Sometimes ruin guardians didn’t attack unless someone entered a specific area; as long as this was taken into consideration, it wasn’t impossible to live in ruins. It wasn’t exactly common for bandits to settle in such places, but nor was it completely unheard of.

“But there are loads of bandits, right? Is one ruin enough for ‘em?” asked Gula.

Lapis stuck up her ring finger. “Yes, so that leaves the third possibility. That they have constructed some kind of settlement with those ruins at the center.”

Lapis considered this the worst option of them all. It was essentially option one and option two combined. Trouble in two forms, fused together in a very sticky whole.

If the bandits weren’t very numerous, the possibility of a settlement was low. Unfortunately, judging by the information Loren extracted during interrogation, the bandit population more than supported the third possibility.

“Do you think they really have several hundred bandits stuffed in there?”

“I don’t think they were lying.”

Each captive had offered the same information, so it was credible enough. Not that Loren wanted to believe it. A stronghold several-hundred strong would rival a town or fort. To think there was some kind of organized crime ring of such magnitude—it was hard to swallow.

This left a question of where so many thieves had come from. Even a unification of the surrounding bandits wouldn’t cover several hundred; there was a chance several villages had banded together in a life of crime.

“Hasn’t this gotten to a point where the country has to make a move?”

There were multiple depots, each with a hundred men. Heaped on top of

that, a headquarters several-hundred strong. It was easy to imagine the group numbering a thousand altogether.

If the bandits had a leader capable of unifying those numbers, he had to be quite the individual. It was hard to think someone like that became a bandit without making a name for themselves.

“If someone said he was a foreign spy, I would believe it.”

“Honestly, I wish that were the case,” Lapis said with a sigh.

Rather than some great bandit leader popping up out of nowhere, it would be more understandable if this was the subversive plan of an enemy nation.

“Whether they’re a nameless hero or a provocateur, that doesn’t change what we must do.”

“So we’re really doing it? What a pain.”

“It doesn’t seem we can complete Ms. Tizona’s job unless we do,” Lapis said, trying to pacify Gula. Then, she clapped her hands to gather everyone’s attention. Under everyone’s watchful, curious eyes, she burst into a smile like a blooming flower. “Now it’s time for that rummaging we’ve all been waiting for.”

Tizona and Gula had made quite a mess of the buildings, but they had taken care not to damage the important bits. Namely the handful of storehouses.

The most precious goods would be picked out and sent to headquarters, but there would still be valuables awaiting the selection process and plenty of good things that didn’t make the cut. There seemed to be no other place in the depot to store loot.

Perhaps some cold, hard cash would be kept in the main building, but Loren didn’t have much hope of that. If the best items were being gathered at HQ, the first things to go would be coins and jewels, both valuable and easy to carry. That stuff would probably be at the headquarters already.

Even so, this was a base that supported close to a hundred bandits. There had to be a good amount remaining, and they would take anything they could.

“Worst case, we’ll need to borrow some manpower from town to carry it.”

They knew from the start it would be impossible to take everything. Loren

considered borrowing a page from the bandits' books, picking out the most valuable things and having the town take care of the rest, maybe offering some money for it in exchange.

"I'll go through the storehouses with Lapis. Gula, Tizona, look around the main building."

"A'ight, leave it to me."

"Very well."

On Loren's orders, Gula and Tizona jogged off to the half-standing wreck that was the main building. Loren and Lapis stepped into the first storehouse.

After swiftly running a lap around the mountainous piles of goods in all the storehouses, Lapis promptly returned to Loren and grumbled, "I was expecting it, but they haven't kept anything decent."

Loren hadn't taken a good look himself, but he could see that the storehouses mostly contained food and equipment for the bandits. Neither would go for much money, and he was beginning to think he had missed the mark when Lapis ran off again. She returned with a few longswords, then a few daggers, some gauntlets, and several helmets. She wasn't done yet.

"These are about the only things of note."

"What about them?"

"Hold on."

At first glance, they looked like normal equipment he could find at any armory. Still, Lapis had singled them out, so they clearly couldn't be ordinary. They didn't seem to be well-maintained, in any case. Loren stared hard at their grimy surface, and once Lapis returned with the last piece, she finally answered.

"They're enchanted."

"All of them?"

Lapis hadn't brought back a lot of items, but it was still nothing to sneeze at. Buying a new longsword cost a few dozen silver coins, but a magic enchantment could raise that price exponentially. Even if the armor wasn't a complete set, the sheer quantity would put the price in the gold coin range regardless.

“What are they doing in a bandit warehouse?”

“Who knows? Maybe they’re trying to use what they found in those ruins Ms. Tizona was talking about.”

Ruins were often filled with treasure waiting to be found. Money from an ancient era, gemstones, items made of rare materials...and enchanted goods like those Lapis had gathered and placed before Loren.

If the bandits had infiltrated the ruins, there was a high chance they had made off with these items.

“There’s also the possibility they attacked a merchant and took these as spoils of war. We can’t say anything for certain.”

“How powerful are they?”

Calling them enchanted was simple, but enchantments came in all shapes and sizes. The difference in price could be as great as the difference between heaven and earth. A grimy sword could go for dozens of gold coins, while an eye-catching ornamental armor might only have as much value as a market piece.

The items in the warehouse were plain and filthy, and none of them looked particularly valuable, but just maybe... Loren asked to be sure.

Lapis folded her arms, gazed over the piles of equipment, and gave it some thought. “I don’t think there’s anything too spectacular. Some slice a bit better, some are a little harder than usual, but that is the extent of it,” she said as she plucked out two daggers.

They were tucked away in modest leather sheaths and looked no different from normal daggers. Lapis held them out to Loren and said, “These two are a little different. This one has Dragonslayer, and this one has been imbued with Painbringer.”

Loren was impressed by Lapis’s keen eye—she could appraise goods without having to bring them to a smithy in some large town. In any case, he took the daggers. Neither seemed particularly special. The Dragonslayer had a blue gemstone embedded in the pommel, while the Painbringer contained a red stone in the same spot.

“What could the craftsman have been thinking, imbuing a dagger with Dragonslayer? There aren’t many people out there who could get close enough to a dragon to use that.”

“Maybe he made it as a hobby? They’re interesting enough, so how about I try them out for a bit?”

Dragons were the greatest of the many monsters that existed in the world. The greatest among them—the ancient dragons—were said to hold power rivaling the gods. Whether this was true or not, Loren couldn’t say.

Confronting an ancient dragon meant death most of the time, and the lesser dragons, quite a bit weaker, could only be taken out by several silver-rank adventurer parties working together, and only then with great sacrifice.

To confront something like that with a dagger sounded like some sort of bad joke, but still, Loren liked the sound of a dragonslaying dagger. As long as Tizona allowed it, he planned on adding it to his own equipment.

“Well, I don’t see why not,” Tizona told him. “What’s the point of a weapon if you don’t use it... But Dragonslayer on a dagger? Are you supposed to throw it? A dragon’s breath has a longer range than anyone can throw a dagger.”

She and Gula had just finished rummaging through the main building as Loren returned with his arms full of loot.

The daggers were relatively pricey, and he had been worried about Tizona’s answer, given her financial woes, but she agreed so easily that he was almost disappointed.

“I would be grateful if you considered them part of your reward.”

“I’m fine with that. But can you talk with Lapis about how much of the cost they’ll cover?” Loren replied without hesitation. *So it’s come to that.*

Dejected, Tizona turned to Lapis, who was smiling by Loren’s side. Loren, who wasn’t on the up and up with market prices, might have written off a good amount of Tizona’s debt. Pitted against Lapis, she had no choice but to surrender.

Of course, Tizona wasn't exactly the expert on enchantment pricing either. Even if she did negotiate with Lapis, it was hard to say who would ultimately benefit.

"So, any results on your end?"

"Lackluster, for the scale of their forces. But for a bandit group around these parts, I'd reckon they did their best to save up a bit," Gula said, lowering a moderately heavy bag to the ground.

As the bag slumped down, the jingling told a tale of the coins within it.

"A few gold, some decent silver, plenty of copper, I'd say. Also, a smattering of gemstones, but nothing to get worked up over."

Gula didn't seem satisfied, but Tizona was deeply relieved. The amount Gula tallied meant Tizona would be able to pay the party their reward, at least.

Everything else went to Tizona herself and thus straight to paying her debts. As for whether it was enough to put her in the black, Tizona's face made that clear.

"Not nearly enough, huh."

"Did it show on my face? I'm sorry. It's definitely not, but this is not our main objective."

After all, Tizona was out for the ruins farther down the road. The depot was merely a detour. The decent gains from this pit stop had already made this a worthwhile venture.

"All right, let's take our haul and our captives and return to town for a bit."

They had no further business at the depot once they had claimed their prize. They also needed to return to town and report the completion of their request. The goods scraped together from the depot needed dealing with, and though it wasn't a mindblowing sum, they couldn't just walk around with so many coins. They needed some way of storing everything.

Additionally, they needed to leave the ten-odd captives with the proper authorities.

"It's gonna be a pain to carry them all the way to town..."

One or two could be loaded onto their wagon, but ten would snap the wheels. They'd probably have to drag the ten bound men behind them. They could wake the bandits up and have them follow on their own two feet, but that would take forever.

"How about we take care of half of them first?" Gula suggested.

Five was pushing it a bit, but still possible for the wagon, but Loren simply couldn't permit it.

"I promised I'd hand them to the authorities. Can't go against my word."

"Wow. How honorable..."

"That's what's good about Mr. Loren," said Lapis, in contrast to Gula's sigh.

Not that Gula had really meant it when she suggested killing them. If Loren didn't give her the go-ahead, she wasn't married to the idea. That left them puzzling out a way to transport ten bound bandits.

"We'll have to walk, then."

"It'll take time. Are you sure about that?"

"I didn't think our attack on the depot would end so quickly. Even if it is a day on foot, that's not too off schedule."

"Then we'll make 'em walk, and tie them to the back of the wagon."

"If you do that, can't the bandits all work together to pull and stop the wagon from moving at all?" Lapis said, sounding quite reasonable.

The bandits had no reason to meekly do as they were told and follow the wagon. Even if this incurred Loren's wrath and marked them for death, they could all pull the wagon to a stop or even tip it over. Then, if the wagon fell just right, they might get a chance to run away. As slim as the chances were, it would be a better end for them than being turned in to the authorities.

"Then what?"

"Let's see. Once everyone's awake, let's have one die an incredibly brutal death," Lapis said, totally serious.

Loren's face twisted with conflict. Tizona was taken by complete surprise.

“If you tie them up in a line, then someone has to be in the back, right? Then Mr. Loren simply has to say, ‘You’ll end up like that guy if I see any funny business. To make sure you don’t forget it, I’ll be having you drag him behind you.’”

“Oh, I see. And the corpse is gonna look worse and worse the more they drag it. They won’t forget their fear, and it’ll set a nice example,” Gula said with a nod.

Tizona drifted over to Loren, who still looked unconvinced.

“Loren,” she whispered into his ear. “You should...do a better job picking your party members.”

“Can’t say I haven’t thought that before,” he replied. Then he turned to Lapis and Gula, who awaited his approval, and shook his head. “Not happening. I already said we’re turning them all in. Maybe if they did something fishy, but I’m not making an example of someone who did nothing.”

“Is that so? Then what now?” Lapis asked, not particularly disappointed.

For the time being, Loren instructed Gula to return everyone’s consciousness. Gula restored the bandits’ sapped strength, and once they were awake, they each laid eyes on Loren nearby. Their faces stiffened as they began struggling to get as far away from him as they could.

Loren watched them roll around a while before clearly instructing, “Don’t make a fuss and follow the wagon. It might be hard for you, but you reap what you sow. Just give up. No funny business. Before you get any ideas, one of my comrades wanted to thin you out to make you easier to transport. I stopped her because I promised to turn you in, but you could make me eat my words. If you do, I guarantee that you’ll look back at what I did before like a light massage.”

Instead of menacing them, Loren figured the plain truth was the best way to ensure their understanding. Whether he realized it or not, though, he’d just made a sizable threat.

The frozen men stared at him with fearful eyes. He peered back at them curiously. “I just told you the truth out of the kindness of my heart.”

Their teeth were clattering now, and he scratched his head.

Rather than failing to explain himself and making the bandits feel like they had hope, Loren thought it would be kinder to warn them from the very start. That didn't seem to be the case. He had simply stirred up more anxiety.

Looks like I did something I shouldn't have, he thought. Yet for some reason, Lapis and Gula were both smiling sweetly and giving him an enthusiastic thumbs up. Thanks to that bit, the bandits accepted their fate of following the wagon without complaint.

Loren and his party rode in comfort, and, though the bandits did get several breaks along the way, they still made good time through the night. The next day, when the sun had climbed into the sky, they managed to reach their destination.

But they had no time to rest. The prisoners were handed to the town, still covered in all their wounds, and the party met with the town leaders to report the completion of their request. That was when a bit of trouble broke out.

They had returned so quickly. Some in the town suspected they had simply apprehended a handful of random bandits found along the way. This pissed Gula off, and she would have devoured the whole town in a rage had it not been for Loren's desperate pacification. During this exchange, Lapis still negotiated with the town.

Lapis insisted the town could simply hear the testimony of their captives and send a fast horseman to confirm the fall of the depot. That meant the town needed time to confirm their story.

Thus, they would be held up until the town was done with the investigation.

"Was it all right to leave the depot like that?" Loren whispered to Lapis. They were in a decently high-class guest room with Tizona and Gula lounging on the sofa.

After all, the party had simply abandoned the depot after taking whatever they could. Loren wondered if they should have done a bit of cleanup.

After a moment of thought, Lapis answered, "It's fine, isn't it? There's nothing left there, after all."

"Nothing... There has to be something."

“There’s nothing. Just a few half-destroyed buildings.”

A normal fight would have left nearly a hundred corpses. However, Loren had hardly lifted a finger; Tizona and Gula had dealt with most of it. The bandits Tizona fought were reduced to ash, leaving more dust than corpses. The ones Gula defeated were cleanly gobbled down, not a fragment of their corpse left to be buried.

Had the corpses remained, they would have drawn monsters and beasts, or evil spirits could have possessed the bodies and formed undead. With not a scrap left behind, Lapis didn’t see the need to tidy up after themselves.

“Then there’s no proof we destroyed the depot, is there?”

“There’s the destroyed main building and the testimony of the prisoners we brought. We should be fine.”

It would take some time, but Lapis wasn’t the least bit worried. The town simply wanted a chance to confirm the truth, and they weren’t detaining the party under any suspicion. They were, in fact, being treated very favorably. As she glanced at Tizona and Gula relaxing on a soft, fluffy sofa, Lapis thought there was no issue in that regard.

“I expected them not to trust our report, to an extent. If time isn’t an issue, it’s not bad to take a bit of a break.”

“That...might be true. I’ll take a nap.”

Now that they had stopped marching, there was nothing for Loren to do. In that case, his best course of action was to get some shut eye and shake off any fatigue. He sank deep into one of the room’s sofas, closed his eyes, and quickly fell into the deep, rhythmic breathing of the truly conked out.

“I should sleep, too.”

“Then I’ll take the spot next to...wait!”

Gula tried to shift from her current sofa to the seat next to Loren. But if looks could kill, Lapis’s eyes would have struck her dead on the spot, and she frantically returned to her place.

Lapis maintained her harrowing look, locked tight on Gula, until Gula curled

up in resignation. Then Lapis settled in beside Loren. She rested her head on his shoulder and slowly closed her eyes.

Eventually, the room became a quiet space filled only with four sleepers' breaths.

Chapter 6:

Redeparture to Emergence

LAPIS WAS RIGHT. It didn't take much time for the town to confirm their work. The captives were immediately interrogated, and the fastest horse and rider returned with news of the depot.

Both tasks confirmed the party's attack on the bandit depot, as well as its utter annihilation. Thus, Loren and his party received the town's gratitude.

"It kinda feels like they're flip-flopping," Gula muttered, still holding a grudge over the town's initial doubts. But these negative thoughts flew right out of her head the moment she saw the feast the town had prepared as a reward.

How self-interested, Loren thought with a side glance to Gula merrily inhaling every last scrap of food. He found himself talking with the town's higher-ups, mainly about how the treatment of the prisoners would be left to them.

However, he had made a promise, and he informed them that the bandits had been quite cooperative. In addition, he declined further monetary reward. The town couldn't scrape together a decent sum to begin with, and they needed whatever funds they could get to repair their southern district. At least, that was his official line.

In truth, there was something else on his mind, and he needed the town's cooperation.

"If you'll allow me, I'd like to suggest a different form of payment."

Loren's request of the town's stout representative started with a transfer of the goods they had brought from the depot. The party couldn't just haul them around, and Loren wanted the less-valuable weapons and armor converted to cash. Loren insisted that he would leave the pricing to the town—which earned a dissatisfied look from Lapis, but the town representative quickly began appraising what they had retrieved.

The town had braced themselves to pay for the bandit removal, and Loren's

refusal to accept it had been beyond their expectations. Instead, they were going to purchase goods from the depot, allowing them to profit. They had no reason to decline.

The town offered a total sum that was a bit higher than their initial reward, and Loren easily assented.

“We could have raised it twenty percent higher if you left it to me,” Lapis whispered. Loren patted her head with a wry smile.

Certainly, leaving negotiations to her would have put them ahead, monetarily speaking. But to Loren, the negotiations were more of a side thing. He didn’t want to take up too much time with it, nor did he want the town to suffer loss because of it.

“Are you really all right with this? It’s not too late for me to get involved.”

“No, I’m fine. There is one more thing, though.”

Loren’s second request was to borrow the same wagon they had taken to the depot. Horses alone were quite expensive, and they took money to maintain. They were a valuable commodity. The wagon also came with a hefty price tag, and Loren wanted to borrow it without a rental fee.

“We came here for a separate matter, and thanks to those bandits, we’re a bit short on time.”

If the wagon could take them to their initial destination, it would save them two days’ worth of walking. The horses would get them there in a day at most, and that certainly was enticing.

Though Tizona said she still had time, there was nothing wrong with preparing for the worst.

“The place we’re going is a bit dangerous. We might not return. You gotta consider that, but how does that sound?”

Loren needed to be honest about the potential losses, but the representative didn’t seem to pay it much mind. He smiled and answered, “Very well. Please use it as you see fit.”

“I know I’m the one asking here, but are you sure?”

The wagon had to be one of the town's precious assets. Even with Loren admitting it might not make it back, the representative seemed happy to concede.

"No, no, I don't mind. I won't hold any grudges even if you never give it back. The town has already received something of greater value."

That something being a bandit threat removed at hardly any cost. The town hadn't sent any soldiers. Loren had declined a monetary reward. The only money they had spent, in fact, had been on stolen goods that they would be able to sell or trade later.

On top of this, a rumor that close to a hundred bandits had been annihilated in a day was spreading on the wind. It was hard to imagine any new bandits would take the risk of moving in any time soon. It wasn't a permanent solution, but the town had received a long lease on peace.

Factoring all of these into the calculations, Loren's request seemed paltry by comparison.

Details aside, Loren was just happy to borrow the wagon. Thanks to the town's generosity, he and his party members immediately got to work loading their bags from the donkeys onto the wagon and promptly took their leave.

"So I'm still the driver..." Lapis muttered, a touch resentful.

"You're the best driver we've got."

"Then at least, Mr. Loren, come and sit next to me."

"Me? I'd just get in the way."

The sword on his back was quite a nuisance, and the cabman's perch wasn't very spacious either. But if he removed the sword and left it in the wagon, he would be slow to react if anything happened.

"It feels like I'm being left out."

"We're not trying to, but... Well, fine."

It would be a nuisance, but only in being a bit uncomfortable. If putting up with that would allow Lapis to devote her attention to steering, there was little else he could do. Loren moved up next to her.

Gula grinned behind him. She was joined by Tizona, who watched over the situation curiously. Loren did his best to ignore the both of them.

“The eyes I’m getting are a bit off-putting.”

“Should I go crush them?” Lapis asked, in a way completely unbefitting a priest. Tizona quickly looked away, while Gula immediately pretended she was sleeping.

Pressing on through these exchanges, the party steadily proceeded onward, and arrived near the ruins by the time the sun set and the darkness closed in.

“That was far too smooth.”

“The bandits around these parts all joined the bigger organization, right? We crushed a depot. I doubt they’ll be popping up in that area.”

“We didn’t see any monsters either.”

“Monsters are more sensitive than humans.”

As long as they had Gula in the wagon, anyone or anything capable of sensing a dark god would never think of attacking. Monsters were quite tuned in to that sort of thing. Gula put no effort into concealing her existence, after all. *I guess I should be thankful we don’t get any monster attacks on the move*, Loren thought.

On the other hand, he would need Gula to suppress herself if they were aiming to earn money by hunting monsters. He would keep that in mind if it ever came to that.

“So what do we do from here?”

To reach Tizona’s ruins, they had to step off the main road and enter the mountains. Loren’s preference was often to attack at night, but without any knowledge of the enemy’s scope and structure, it wasn’t wise to thoughtlessly charge in.

“We’ll have to spend a night hidden somewhere and scout them out when the sun is up. Sure, it might be a pain, but they’ve got a crazy number of bandits. They could have something up their sleeve.”

“You’re being quite cautious. I get the feeling we could brute force it with

these allies,” Lapis replied. “It could end with just Ms. Gula and Ms. Tizona, you know.”

“I, well... I don’t mind.”

“I am the one who issued the quest,” said Tizona. “I’ll go if you tell me to go. Come to think of it, is Gula really a magician? I saw the aftermath at the depot, but what sort of magic leaves marks like that?”

“That’s a secret. A magician who shows their hand is worse than third-rate.”

Magicians had a limit to the number of times they could use magic. Each individual shot they fired was incredibly powerful, but they weren’t the sort of fighters who could take down an army alone. Usually, a magician acting as a front-line fighter would tank enemy attacks as they kited the enemies together and finished them with one powerful shot. However, the marks Gula left at the depot clearly were not related to that kind of strategy.

“You must be a high-ranking magician, then. But then, it wouldn’t be strange for your name to spread.”

“I never made my name a selling point, so I guess they just don’t know me. Do you know how many geniuses there are in the world, smothered by the rabble?”

“That’s... But if you have that much power, then be it as a magician or as an adventurer, you could earn considerable fame.”

“Not interested. You can’t eat fame.”

“I won’t tell you not to chat, but don’t forget we’re approaching the enemy base. It’ll be even more troublesome if they get a preemptive attack on us,” Loren intruded, slightly curt.

It would be an enormous pain if Gula’s identity got out—that much was obvious. She seemed to be playing it off well, but the longer the conversation went on, the greater the chances of a slip up.

“Let’s hide the wagon already. We can’t raise any smoke, so no cooking either. Unless we find a nice basin, we’ll need to start digging.”

There didn’t seem to be any thickets around big enough to hide a wagon. If

they could find some low ground, they could set the wagon there and cover it with plants to make it harder to spot. If nature didn't provide, that unfortunately left them to make one on their own.

"If you want to spend all night digging, I won't stop you."

"Yeah, wouldn't want that. A'ight, Tizona. How about we get searching."

"You have a point."

Understanding this was no time to talk, Tizona obediently followed Loren's instructions and began poking around the area. For the time being, he had managed to distract her. He patted his chest, and Lapis patted him on the back.

The next day, after insufficient sleep and insufficient meals, the party headed on foot toward Tizona's destination, leaving the hidden wagon behind.

There, Loren was greeted with a sight that left him rather fed-up.

The ruins themselves were on the side of the mountain—rather, it was like they had been buried in the mountain itself. The entrance was large enough to see from a great distance and seemed to be built into the rocky surface.

He had to wonder how something like that had gone without discovery. According to Tizona, there had originally been tall trees surrounding it, making it harder to spot.

Then why was it visible now? The landscape had changed.

"They've done a nice job fortifying," said Lapis.

The trees had been chopped down not just to clear the area, but to build a sizable fort and several smaller buildings. There was also a tall fence surrounding those structures, and a deep moat running around the fence.

Watchtowers dotted the landscape, and they could see people both above and below them. The gate built into the tall fencing boasted considerable heft and a good number of gatekeepers.

Additionally, there were archers all over and even standing ballistae. It was no exaggeration to call this a fortress.

Lapis went on, “Won’t this be about as difficult as conquering a small castle?”

She posed this question to Loren and Tizona, the resident combat professionals. Loren groaned while Tizona scratched her face. The depot they decimated had been pretty large-scale, but the headquarters, with all these soldiers and all this equipment, was on another level entirely.

No sane person would pit four people against that.

“I’m confident my *Heat* can deal with arrows... But as for ballistae bolts, I’m not sure if they’ll burn up before they reach me. I can manage with *Roast*, but not if they concentrate their fire on me with those numbers.”

“The moat is an issue. We can’t cross it if they raise the drawbridge.”

Most likely, it was too deep to wade through and too broad to jump over. They didn’t have any siege equipment just lying around, so it would be a difficult obstacle to surmount.

There was a bridge across the moat so people could come and go, but it was hung by ropes and could be retracted in case of emergency.

Swimming was an option, but that would make them prime targets for arrows.

“Asking just in case, but Tizona, can you use those abilities in water?”

“You must be joking, Loren.”

If she could, then perhaps she could swim across while burning through arrows. But apparently, even her abilities weren’t irrational enough to let her handle flames while in water.

“The ruins are beyond the fence. We have to pass through the bandit stronghold to get to them. If their defenses are that sturdy...”

“Ms. Gula, do you have any ideas?”

Lapis turned the conversation to Gula, who had yet to give any input. She was staring hard at the fence, thinking long and hard over it. It was only at Lapis’s call that she realized the others were looking at her.

She blinked and said, “Huh... Oh, an idea? We can’t just attack from the

front?”

“Were you listening?”

“We can’t? Then how about climbing the mountains out back and dropping down on the ruin side?”

The fences did not draw a complete circle around the compound. They cut off just around the entrance to the ruins like a horseshoe tucked against the mountainside.

Gula had suggested taking a detour around the bandit stronghold, climbing to the summit, and descending to the ruins from there. That would at least get them to their destination.

But Loren looked at the state of the mountain. The slope was steep, with jagged rocks protruding here and there. This would be a troublesome mountain to climb, which was saying nothing of the descent. At the very least, from his amateur assessment, it did not seem to be the sort of leisure hike you went on without equipment.

“That might be our last resort.”

Perhaps they would try if they could think of nothing else. Gula didn’t intend to push her idea any further, and she returned her eyes to the ruins.

Curious about her gaze and expression, Loren sent a signal to Lapis with his eyes.

“Ms. Tizona, how about we get a little closer? I want to observe their equipment and proficiency in greater detail.”

“M-me?”

“If you please. Ms. Gula is terrible with that sort of thing, and Mr. Loren is a large man with a large sword, so he is more likely to be spotted.”

“Really? Very well. You don’t mind, do you, Loren?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Seeing Loren’s nod, Tizona and Lapis concealed themselves among the shadows of the trees and slowly crept in. They were quickly out of sight and

Loren waited until he determined they were far enough away.

Gula still hadn't taken her eyes off of the ruins and he whispered to her. "Is something there?"

"Probably... Someone. One of us."

As Gula responded, a blatant scowl settled over her face. By "one of us" she clearly meant a dark god. Anyone would have made that face if they knew what was ahead.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Can't say who it is, but it's someone. We should be careful."

"Does being careful around you guys ever help?"

So far, he had met Gluttony, Sloth, and Lust. They were all immense beings whose very existence influenced their surroundings, and they were powerful in a fight as well.

As she worked alongside Loren and Lapis, Gula kept her dark god powers as suppressed as she could, so that power could slip their minds. But if Gula actually wielded her authority to its full potential, she went far beyond what any human could hope to achieve.

Precisely because Loren knew this, Gula's cautionary words rang hollow to him.

"Well, I don't think there's anything wrong with being careful," she said, looking just a little hurt.

But Loren still couldn't help but wonder if there was a point to caution. He was doomed no matter how safe he played it.

"You can't tell which god it is?"

"A bit beyond me. I could identify Lust in a heartbeat, though."

Loren recalled the entity toting the title "Dark God of Lust." The mere recollection inflicted psychic damage and rolled his stomach. Indeed, it wouldn't be strange to sense that one by mere presence. But if Gula couldn't distinguish between the other dark gods, that wasn't much to be done.

“If they’re around here, they must have to do with the bandits, then.”

“Right, right. So I’m thinking it’s Greed or Pride.”

Gula broke it down: If the dark god was using the bandits to gather valuables, then it would be Greed. However, if they simply wanted to stand above all others and have a legion at their beck and call, it could be Pride.

“And they’re both a pain to deal with.”

“What are they like?”

Loren wanted as much information as he could get, but Gula struggled to come up with an answer.

“Well... I don’t want to give you any preconceived notions. And, you know, it’s been hundreds of years since we were sealed. We might not be the same as we used to be. I’d feel bad if I gave you the wrong info.”

“I guess so...”

If Gula painted a clear picture for him, any altered details would take him by surprise. This discrepancy could mean life and death, and Gula insisted she didn’t want to tell him anything unnecessary.

“Now on to clearing out this compound. If I use a bit of my power, I can gulp down that tiny moat. I can crunch up the fences and swallow them whole.”

Loren took another good look at the bandit headquarters. The amount of water in the moat was extraordinary, and the fence was high and sturdy. He had to wonder how large Gula’s stomach was to hold it all.

“We could if Tizona wasn’t around.”

“Then how about we sneak Tizona into the ruins?”

“Well...”

“I’ll cause a ruckus at the front. We use that chance to get her across the moat and fence and sneak her through.”

“What about us?”

“I can crush the place once she’s in the ruins.”

After that, they would have to reunite with her and tell some lie about how they had barely managed to break through.

“Since we’re dealing with bandits, it wouldn’t be strange if they fell to pieces after some damage.”

And if the bandits were going to run away, it didn’t make much difference if they ended up in Gula’s stomach instead. The party just had to get their stories straight: the attack had instilled fear in the bandits, and they had all taken flight.

Gula’s plan was somewhat aggressive, but even if Tizona had her suspicions, she had no way of knowing what happened while she was gone as long as there were no survivors.

“Wouldn’t Tizona say that group battles are her area of expertise?”

“She’s the strongest one of us on her own, right? Then if she causes a mess in the ruins, between her ruckus and our ruckus, their attention will be split. Ain’t that a good reason to split up?”

It wasn’t the worst idea.

The problem was how they would get Tizona across a bridgeless moat. If she could swim, then maybe they could send her across while they caused a diversion.

“We could at least try proposing it.”

And if there were no better ideas, at least they had some kind of plan. For the time being, Loren waited for Lapis to return. He would bring it up, for whatever it was worth.

It was some time before Lapis and Tizona returned. Loren presented Gula’s idea and it was easily accepted.

Though Loren worried about whether Tizona would be able to cross the moat, Tizona herself was far less concerned. He was mainly concerned about her heavy armor.

As a mercenary, Loren had been trained to swim in armor, but that had been lighter leather armor. He couldn’t imagine himself swimming in plate.

“Even if I sink, it’s not a long distance.”

The moat was too wide to jump across, but to swim across would only take one long held breath.

“While you’re causing an uproar, I shall use *Roast* to turn part of the bank into a slope I can climb up.”

“That’s a convenient ability you’ve got there.”

Her *Roast* turned anything to ash within a designated zone. It didn’t matter whether that anything was flammable or not. If she turned part of the bank into a ramp, she simply had to run along the bottom while holding her breath.

“Once I have crossed the fence, do I just have to cause a diversion?”

“No, if possible, you should get into the ruins. I feel bad about sending you ahead, but that is their moneymaker. The bandits that rush into the ruins will make them short-handed here.”

“Understood. Leave it to me,” Tizona declared, tapping her chest.

With her abilities, it would take more than mere bandits to overwhelm her. But there was still one thing he needed to tell her.

“After you enter the ruins, don’t push yourself too hard until you meet back up with us. We’re up against someone who can rally this much support. Their leader must be someone of considerable skill.”

“Yes, I’m sure. This would be difficult to pull off if they weren’t as skilled or charismatic as the Blade Fiend. It would be impossible for you or me to fight them alone.”

“No, it would be impossible for me regardless.”

Loren refused to have his name listed with hers. Putting that aside, they now had a plan to enact. Tizona moved along the moat, positioning herself a good distance from the front gate.

Loren gave it some time until he assumed she had reached her position. Soon, they would be making as much noise as possible to draw attention.

“My arms have been aching for battle.”

“No, you can’t get serious when Tizona might be watching, right?”

Tizona would eventually return to her own mercenary company, and they couldn’t risk her seeing anything too odd. Especially not when it came to Lapis, who could use magic despite being a priest. Such a thing would be so abnormal that Tizona would most definitely question Lapis’s identity.

In Gula’s case, they could still insist her authorities were some form of powerful magic. Mercenaries rarely associated with magicians, so even if Tizona asked around her company afterward, she would have no way to disprove Gula’s story. Even if she hunted down a magician, they could claim it was undiscovered magic excavated from ruins or some new enchantment. There were plenty of excuses.

“Then we should get going.”

When they were in the clear, Lapis urged them on. They had to attract attention, and there was no longer any reason to hide.

“I guess I’ll make some noise!”

With a roar, Loren burst from the thicket. Gula and Lapis raced behind him, but though they shared his initial momentum, for some reason they quickly dropped pace and trailed behind.

For a moment, he thought they were taking position: him as the vanguard swordsman, with the priest and magician offering support. He continued on at full speed, his eyes locked onto the bandits preparing to intercept.

Scena’s voice suddenly echoed in his head. *«You need something flashy, right, Mister? I’ve got you covered!»*

He had no time to ask what she intended to do. In the next instant, he crossed blades with a bandit right before the moat. The difference in skill was clear.

Sparks should have flown as two blades hit, but Loren’s sword cleaved clean through the bandit’s weapon and continued on to the man’s body, splitting him diagonally from the shoulder.

On the return swing, Loren snapped a spear thrust his way. As his attacker

stared at the stump of his once-weapon, his head flew into the air in a spray of blood.

“What was that?!”

“Enemy attack! There are...three of them?!”

“Raise the bridge! Cut off the path and shoot them dead... Wait... Aaah?!”

Loren could barely hear the voices of the bandits beyond the fence as they gave the order. With the bridge raising, Loren would be cut off from his attack, but Gula simply had to fire her magic across the moat. Yet among the shouts of distant bandits he could barely hear, he began to pick up screaming mixed in. Doubtful as he was, he wondered, *If I sprint, could I make it before the bridge is all the way up?*

“The bridge...isn’t moving?”

He had definitely heard the order. And yet the ten-meter-long bridge didn’t budge. Loren managed to span it in the space of one breath, so simply done that it felt anticlimactic. The cause waited for him at the end of his sprint.

“Wh-what?! Hey, stop! I didn’t... Gyah?!”

“Don’t bite me! Don’t eat me! Please don’t eat me!”

“Where did they come from! These... These undead?!”

As soon as he passed through the gate, he found the bandits in a chaos. The things causing the uproar were figures clad in the same armor as the bandits they assailed. Their skin was pale and bloodless, their eyes hollow and lifeless. The figures attacked, grabbing bandit arms and biting down with uncannily white teeth.

And it wasn’t just one or two of them. When Loren looked around, he saw the same travesty unfolding all over. The bandits struggled not to let it become a one-sided battle, fighting back with their weapons. But even with sliced arms and split heads, their foes continued to reach for flesh. The bandits near the entrance were in a panic.

“What’s going on?” Loren asked.

‘I used energy drain to make corpses, then used a Lifeless King’s power to

reanimate them!>

Scena's voice was so cheery it was hard to imagine she had brought about something so gruesome.

Loren had been so concerned about concealing a dark god and a demon he had nearly forgotten there was one more person he needed to hide. Now free from the shackles of Tizona's gaze, Scena had no reason to restrain herself. For the sake of the man who allowed her to live on, she would wield her power to the fullest. If only he had seen it coming, but he had been too worried about Gula and Lapis.

"Ah... So it happened."

Apparently, Lapis had expected as much. Gula as well, which was why they had let Loren go on ahead.

"It's gettin' pretty gruesome here. I thought it might come to this."

"There were too many for us to fight properly... But to Ms. Scena, I'm sure they were just a bigger herd."

Scena's strength as the highest form of undead was incomplete, but as far as humans were concerned, she was incomprehensibly powerful. It didn't matter how many hundreds of soldiers stood against her. If she could make even a few corpses, they would eat their once-allies and spread their damage endlessly.

Higher-quality soldiers could fight back, but weak soldiers and bandits didn't have the right stuff to resist the power of a Lifeless King.

Loren mused over these facts as he wiped the blood from his sword. He had only cut down two men. As he hung his weapon on his back, there was an explosion from further in the fort, flinging dirt into the air. From beneath the soil emerged a dragon, somewhat small, with a body composed of bones. It began attacking buildings and bandits alike, showing no discrimination.

"That's...a bone dragon, isn't it?"



“Well, I doubt you’d find a dragon corpse around these parts, so it ain’t a dragon zombie.”

“Then it must be small because there wasn’t much material to work with.”

“Who knows? Don’t ask me.”

Mere bandits couldn’t suppress a massive monster that even an iron-rank adventurer would have fled from. Even with numbers on their side, it was like a swarm of insects challenging a human. Not to mention their foe took the form of a dragon, a very intimidating creature to stare down. Hardly anyone had the courage to pick up their weapons and face it.

“Do you think Ms. Tizona is in the ruins yet?”

“Couldn’t say. If she witnessed that, we’d have to play dumb and say the undead broke out by pure coincidence.”

“A purely coincidental bone dragon?”

“I’m just spitballing. How is anyone supposed to convince her after seeing that?”

With undead, the truly terrifying thing was that those they killed only swelled their ranks. In short, the casualty count would rise without limit.

Realizing this, Loren hurriedly turned his mind to Scena, but she answered as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

«Don’t worry, Mister. I made sure they’ll return to the earth when we’re done.»

He didn’t want a bandit stronghold to be replaced by a mass undead outbreak. Especially when the latter would be the worse option. For the time being, Scena’s words put him at ease.

“They’re not gonna attack us, are they?”

«It isn’t common for servants to attack their king.»

“I hope so... This might be a bit too flashy.”

Attracting bandit attention was now the least of their worries. They had reduced the chances of any bandit paying attention to Tizona, but only because the entire stronghold was on the verge of collapse.

“No use crying over spilled milk... Too late to do anything at this point.”

“We can’t salvage what’s broken, but we should be able to retrieve the coins and gemstones from under the rubble.”

“Can I go fishing around for some food?”

Gula was still rather displeased with her breakfast. She bit at her fingernails and stared enviously at the destroyed buildings and the bandits being eaten by their zombified comrades.

Although Loren wanted to tell her to do whatever she wanted, he was worried for Tizona, who was still by herself. If they ran into the dark god, then Gula’s presence would make a huge difference.

“Endure for now. We have to go after Tizona. She’ll be in hot water if she goes up against the troublesome one.”

“How heartless... You better feed me something nice when we’re back at Kaffa.”

“As long as it doesn’t bankrupt me.”

Perhaps Gula would sit down on the spot and hold her breath if he refused. He carefully chose words that would let them find common ground later. *I might have to rethink how I deal with her*, he thought.

Whether she understood his intentions or not, Gula took one last dissatisfied look at the fortress before joining the others on their way to the ruins.

Chapter 7:

An Encounter to a Decisive Battle

IT WASN'T DIFFICULT to make their way through the bandit stronghold. The bandits didn't have the time or leisure to deal with any of their living intruders.

The bandits had gathered into small united groups to put up a fight against the waves of undead, but once just one of them was turned into undead, the whole group tragically crumbled.

If they wanted a true resolution, they would need to deal with the Lifeless King at the root of it all, but Scena slung her power around from inside Loren, and no one suspected the source of it all was within a human swordsman.

«It is an easy job, sucking them dry and reanimating them,» Scena bragged, though only Loren could hear her voice. She certainly possessed enough power to warrant putting on airs.

Loren observed the situation as he jogged toward the entrance of the ruins. Any quick-witted bandits had already made a tactical retreat. The ones who hadn't were busy fighting, but as they had no way of stopping the outbreak, they could either run or join the undead. It was only a matter of time before the base fell.

In the midst of this chaos, there was nothing to stop Loren and his party from advancing. Soon, they were standing before the ruins that had been their goal from the start.

The door they found there was a massive metal structure that towered several meters high, surely boasting a weight that would make it a trial and a half to move. Seeing as it was shut tight, Loren had to cock his head and wonder how exactly Tizona had gotten inside.

His question was answered by a tug on his sleeve.

"What?"

"There's a side entrance there," said Lapis.

She pointed down the mountain face, a short distance from the massive door. A normal wooden door was built into the rocks.

There were burn marks and two mounds of ash shrinking in the wind. The door also had a hole burned into it just large enough for a person to pass through.

“Why’s there a door there?”

“Presumably...the large door wouldn’t open, so the bandits drilled through the walls and made their own way in.”

Ruins were usually sealed up one way or another. They were physically locked or magically barred, and it seemed the bandits were unable to open this one as intended.

To bypass this, they had put a hole through the adjacent wall.

“How should I put this? That sounds like a lot of work.”

“Well, the wall seems strong enough not to collapse.”

“Which means the big one doesn’t open?”

It was such a grand, magnificent door that ignoring it felt like a waste. Loren put a hand on the surface. He felt the cold metal and, knowing it wouldn’t open anyway, he gave it a light push. With an ease unthinkable of its size and heft, the door swung slightly inward.

“Oi, it moves.”

“Huh? Why does it move?”

“How should I know?”

It had opened when he tried it. There wasn’t much else he could say. He gave a slightly stronger push.

His hands registered hardly any resistance. The door slid smoothly inward.

“Do you think Ms. Tizona opened it from the inside?”

“Would there be a point if there’s already a way in?”

Loren peeked his head through the gap and looked at the nearby wall. He

could see the hole and the burn marks that had opened the path from the outside. Both entrances seemed to lead to exactly the same spot.

“Looks like no one’s home,” Loren said as he stepped inside.

Lapis and Gula followed behind him. Beyond the doorway, they found themselves in a massive entrance hall with a high ceiling. Wide stairs ran along the left and right walls. After one landing, those stairs led up to what would be the third floor of a normal building.

Several chandeliers hung from the ceiling to light up the large space, but now not a single one provided any radiance. Instead, candles made of animal fat had been placed around the first floor, third floor, and landings.

The walls had once boasted some elaborate design, but it had chipped off over many long years, exposing the bare stone texture. The whole place gave the impression of the estate of some noble.

By their initial estimates, the ruins should have been loaded with bandits, and they had braced themselves to be thrown into battle. However, with the chaos Scena had sown, there didn’t seem to be anyone attacking them even as they trespassed.

“Is Ms. Tizona farther in?”

Honing his ears, Loren could only pick out the screams and clashes from the outside. If Tizona was fighting some foe deep in the ruins, he expected some loud sounds to result... And as he strained his ears, he suddenly heard the shrill shriek of a woman.

“What was that?!”

“That sounded like Ms. Tizona’s voice.”

“Sounded like it came from the third floor.”

Tizona was an incredibly powerful mercenary. She wasn’t the sort who would scream as bandits got the better of her. However, Loren belatedly realized that he had forgotten to tell Lapis something.

“Right, there’s one of Gula’s brethren in here.”

“You picked now to tell me that...?”

“Do you think they’re fighting? But that scream didn’t sound like it came from pain or anguish.”

“We won’t know until we start climbing.”

Whatever caused it, Tizona had still screamed. Their objective was not to hypothesize the cause; it was to meet up with her as soon as possible. Loren took the lead and started running.

After he had cleared the stairs and made it up, he took a swift look around. He was in a vast, open space with a number of doors lining both walls. The back wall was set with a large double door incomparable in size to the others. He could see that this door had been cracked open.

Presumably, the sound had escaped through that gap. Drawing the sword from his back, he charged. He couldn’t spare the time to throw the door open, so he swung his sword on his way through.

Wooden fragments scattered through the air. There was a loud crash as the door shattered, and Loren rushed in to find yet another large hall. And there was Tizona, sitting on the floor a short distance away. He hurried over, then quickly looked away.

She was hugging herself, sitting with her legs pressed tightly together. Of all things, her armor had disappeared. Even the undergarments she was supposedly wearing beneath it were gone.

She was, as it were, in her birthday suit.



As Lapis ran past him, he handed her the cloth he used to wrap his sword when it was at rest.

Had he been wearing a cloak, he would have given it to her, but unfortunately, Loren had nothing of the sort. His jacket was actually his armor and he couldn't just hand it over. Thus, the cloth was all he could offer. Luckily, as it was used to wrap a nonsensically large weapon, it was decently large as well.

Lapis took it and draped it over Tizona's shoulders. For the time being, her naked form was covered up.

"Oh? Another rat?"

Though he had taken care not to peep at Tizona, Loren still kept his sword up and maintained a keen watch around them. This hall was wide and high, and there was a raised portion in the back. Set on top of it was something large and gaudily decorated—a crown.

The voice had come from someone sitting atop the throne.

"Huh? Is that you, Gula? What are you doing here? What are you doing with humans? That's quite strange."

"I'm the one who doesn't get you. What are you doing out here, gatherin' a buncha bandits and acting like a king? Did you spend all that time polishing up your idiocy?"

Gula's face and voice both scrunched with disgust.

Loren was surprised by her reaction, but far more fearsome was the voice that emanated from the throne. He could tell it belonged to a man, but still somewhat high-pitched. As far as he could tell, it was a child's voice.

"As toxic as ever, I see. I'm not acting like a king, you know. I mean, I guess I used to be a real king, but that doesn't matter. I did absolutely nothing, and they just started gathering all sorts of things. It was convenient, that's all."

"By the sound of it, you won't come quietly if I ask you to."

"Gula? Are you gathering us? Do you want us to lie low? Unfortunately for you, I think I would be better off doing whatever I want."

The lord stood from the throne. His figure wasn't particularly tall, and by only the meager candlelight, Loren couldn't make out his face from a distance. With a theatrical snap of his fingers, the lord produced a magic light above his head.

"Loren, that there is Mammon Avaritia. They called him the dark god of greed," Gula explained as the magical light revealed the dark god's face.

He was short. He wouldn't even stand as tall as Loren's navel, and his hair was a curly brown mess that poked up sharply here and there. Although his purple eyes—a trait shared by dark gods—looked down on Loren condescendingly, he was as Loren had surmised from the voice. A young boy.

The clothes he wore befitted a child from a decent upbringing, though the item he held was rather strange in contrast.

"Shall I say, 'It is a pleasure to meet you'? Incidentally, human, what are you to Gula? Her portable rations, perhaps?"

With a grin, the boy called Mammon held up the armor Tizona had been wearing in his right hand. His left hand clutched something small and made of cloth, which he twirled around his fingers.

"I don't wanna know, but...are those the naked woman's undergarments?"

"Do you want them? Of course, you'd want them, mister. But you can't have them. I'm not called Greed for nothing."

A vulgar hint crept into his vibrant smile. Loren directed the tip of his greatsword at Mammon, ready to strike at any second.

Mammon made his move. He offhandedly tossed Tizona's armor and clothing behind him and turned a palm toward Loren, who hadn't moved from his spot.

Loren kept at the ready, thinking his foe would use magic. But then, he wondered if he was misunderstanding something. The moment the question entered his heart he immediately dodged to the side.

Not a moment later, Mammon clenched his outstretched hand. Yet nothing had happened at all. As he landed, Loren felt he might have made a mistake as he readied his sword once more.

Mammon, on the other hand, opened his hand and looked at Loren with awe before turning to Gula, who was glaring daggers at him.

“Hmm, you picked up a kid with good instincts, Gula. Color me surprised. I didn’t think he’d evade Greedy Robber on the first try.”

“I can interpret that as an attack, right?”

Loren was sure he’d understood correctly; he was up against a dark god like Gula. Though his opponent looked like a normal boy, he had sensed something wrong and dodged on instinct, but there was nothing to indicate any attack had taken place.

“Now how about this? How does this one feel, mister?”

Mammon flashed an innocent smile as he pointed his palm again.

It was clear there was something going on—but what? Loren leaped to the side again, this time bounding off the floor twice, covering even more ground than the last time.

“Hmm, you’re incredible.”

This time, Mammon’s clenched hand had been directed at Loren’s first landing point. Apparently, Loren had managed to evade by only the smallest margin. *I’m starting to see it*, Loren grumbled to himself.

“Gula, is this his dark god authority?” Loren asked without removing his eyes from Mammon.

Gula nodded. “That’s right. It’s called Greedy Robber, and it lets him forcefully snatch anything he’s aware of. You should already know how he activates it, right?”

If Mammon wasn’t faking or feinting, then it had to activate the moment he clenched his hand. At a glance, it seemed insignificant compared to the authorities of Gula and Luxuria, but it really was quite an unpleasant ability.

After all, though Gula and Luxuria had powerful abilities, they could still be blocked. There was no way of defending against Mammon’s authority. The only thing Loren could do was move before Mammon closed his hand. But if they were locked in close combat, there would be no telling when that ability would

activate, and it would be far harder to avoid.

It wasn't difficult to imagine how dangerous it would be for Loren to have his equipment stolen in battle. Losing his weapon or armor would drastically lower his combat abilities, and having his boots stolen could render him immobile in the right terrain.

I'll have to take a gamble before he uses his authority, Loren thought as he readied his blade.

Again, Mammon pointed his hand. Loren immediately dodged, but the hand didn't follow him. It turned instead to Gula, who stood a bit farther away.

"Ah, snap!"

The delay before she noticed the change in target was a grievous error. She reflexively pulled up her arms to guard, but this was meaningless before Mammon. Those fingers swiftly closed, and Gula fell to the ground with a shriek.

"Did you change your taste in clothing, Gula? I don't remember you wearing anything this flashy."

Twirling around Mammon's index finger were the hot pants Gula had been wearing a moment before.

They had been quite incendiary when Gula wore them, but they lost most of their effect in the hands of a pubescent young boy (even if that was just by appearance). Loren held up his sword, closely observing every action Mammon took, his expression weary.

But Gula, whose clothes had been stolen, had a far less muted reaction. Her face was red, and she hid her lower half as best she could with one hand as she exuded murderous intent toward Mammon's grinning smugness.

"Mammon, you bastard... Surely, you don't think you'll get off lightly after screwing around like that..."

"I won't get off lightly? Then what exactly are you going to do?"

"You're about ta find out!"

Gula's temper snapped. With a scream, she was surrounded by a flock of

Predators, her dark god authority. These fiendish apparitions devoured everything in their trajectory, living or inanimate, and though Loren was taken aback by her torrential rage, he was even more surprised by what came next.

“You’ve got a short fuse now, Gula. Are you getting old?”

Mammon twirled the hotpants with his left hand as he swung sluggishly with his right.

It was only thanks to Scena’s Lifeless King powers that Loren could visualize Gula’s abilities. And through that enhanced vision, he saw something he couldn’t believe. It really had been just a slow gesture. And yet, with that, all the countless mouths primed to tear Mammon to bits were shattered.

Loren watched them vanish in a daze.

“I’ve got more where that came from!”

Gula took no damage when her manifested mouths were busted. The moment they were gone, she produced the next wave. They had the numbers, they had the speed, yet not a single Predator reached Mammon’s body. They shattered in the air from a barely swung hand.

“Have you gotten weaker? No? This is... Yes, you’re too satisfied.” Mammon nodded to himself. There were no longer any mouths coming at him. Gula was still on the floor, her shoulders rising and falling with each breath. Mammon’s grin persisted as he went on. “The authority of Gluttony is powerful, but it derives its power from hunger. Satiety has weakened you.”

“Grr...”

Gula grit her teeth but could not refute that. She could only glare.

“Wait, you’re stronger when you’re starving?”

Come to think of it, Gluttony didn’t mean she could eat an infinite amount. It was natural to think that a full stomach would satisfy any appetite until the next wave of hunger. In short, though Gula wasn’t completely full, she’d had several decent meals, and this made her weaker than the other dark gods.

“Y-you could say that.”

“You’re not holding back because he’s a child, right?”

“Sure, he’s a kid, but he’s a dark god... I mean, yeah, Mammon’s a damn brat both mentally and physically, but...”

Gula looked over to Mammon, who was having fun stretching and spinning the shorts he had stolen. Before she knew it, she was trying to stand and attack again, but Mammon offhandedly tossed her hotpants toward her, distracting her.

“I guess I’ll take the top next.”

By the time she knew what was happening, his hand was already turned toward her. He just had to close it. This time, her shirt would be gone—but before he could, a figure rushed from the side to deliver a full-force kick to his flank.

“Lapis?!”

Lapis had been beside Tizona. But before anyone realized it, she had closed in on Mammon. Mammon had been too focused on Gula and made no preparations to defend himself.

Yes, the impact was considerable. The dark god barely managed to remain where he was, and his hand promptly shifted from Gula to Lapis.

As Lapis’s foot was still extended from her kick, she had no means to dodge. Once his fingers closed, Lapis covered her chest with both hands and jumped back, flushed.

“A surprise attack. And a powerful one too. You’re not human, are you?” Mammon asked as he clutched a white cloth. He spread it out to confirm what it was, then immediately cast it aside before dodging a sword slash that came from behind. He faced off against Loren now.

“Another sneak attack? How uninspired.”

“Shut it. Get a few more years on you before you go around undressing women.”

“I’m older than you, mister.”

“Then quit calling me ‘mister.’”

Mammon blocked and parried the next slash with two hands, yet Loren paid

him no heed and slashed again. For the first time, a look of discomfort crossed the boy's face.

"Don't you understand it won't work?"

"Who can say? If one doesn't work, I'll add another ten or twenty!"

Whether blocked or parried, Loren continued to strike. Sure, it didn't work. But he could keep Mammon's attention while pressuring him so he couldn't use his authority. His thunderous, air-shaking barrage certainly prevented Mammon from focusing on anything else.

"Even a hundred won't... Gah?!"

Just as a composed smile spread across Mammon's face, a kick hit him from behind, sending him flying toward Loren. Loren dodged the flying boy. After sailing by him, Mammon bounced across the floor and hopped up.

"So quick to kick, missy!"

He'd been struck by Lapis, who had temporarily retreated from the front lines. She'd gotten her revenge while he was preoccupied.

However, though he had been pushed back a good distance, it didn't seem like Mammon had taken any damage. He quickly turned a palm toward Lapis, only to be bombarded by Loren's strikes and forced back on the defensive.

"You're a real pain, mister! That sword of yours is a nuisance!"

The first opportunity he got, Mammon aimed his palm. Loren knew the boy was going to use his Greed authority to snatch the sword out of his hands, but he continued to swing regardless. Even if his sword was stolen, he was ready to smack Mammon around with his bare hands.

Mammon sneered as he closed his hand.

"Huh?"

A confused exclamation reached Loren's ears.

He didn't feel the sword disappear from his hands. Since he still grasped the weight of his blade, Loren took a hearty swing with it. Mammon raised his arms to block it a moment too late and was blown sideways, just as far as he had

been by Lapis's kick.

Though he had protected himself from being sliced through, he hadn't mitigated the impact. As Mammon flew, Loren chased after him for a follow-up attack, but Mammon immediately regained his footing and parried.

"Why? Why?!" the boy exclaimed. "Why can't I take it?!"

Loren's hands didn't slow as he looked down at the blade in his grip. His sword had been the target of the Greed authority, yet here it was. It wasn't just Loren. Both Mammon and Gula stared in disbelief.

"Whah?" said Gula. "You gotta be kidding me."

"You're saying it can resist my authority?!"

"Hell if I know! Just drop dead already!"

Mammon was wallowing in confusion, and Loren wouldn't let this opportunity slip by. He activated his self-strengthening, raising his speed even higher than before, and continued to shower Mammon's body with blows.

"Huh? What's going on? That authority isn't something you can guard against," said Gula. She felt the same bewilderment as Mammon.

Her own authority was an offensive power, so it could be dealt with sensibly. But Mammon's authority existed more conceptually. It wasn't really an attack, and thus couldn't be blocked. That was why she considered dodging to be the only way to get around it, yet Loren's sword wasn't stolen. Gula's perception was being flipped on its head.

Having failed to steal the sword from Loren, Mammon tried a second, then a third time, but each ended in failure.

"Something feels strange."

Lapis walked up to Gula with her arms folded in front of her chest. She was still a bit red from Mammon's theft, but Gula didn't have it in her to tease at the moment.

For one thing, Gula herself was pantsless, and she knew she was in for a

fierce, merciless counterattack if she tried going at Lapis.

“Isn’t that authority unfair?” Lapis asked. “Even if he can’t see it, he can steal it as long as he’s aware of it. That’s ridiculous.”

“Well, we’re dark gods, right? Our very existence is ridiculous.”

Why do I have to defend him? Gula thought. But she had given in to Lapis’s intensity and offered a half-hearted excuse. Lapis realized it was pointless to press Gula about it, so she lightened up a bit.

“I do wonder why Mr. Loren’s sword wasn’t stolen.”

“That’s the thing. Even if it’s enchanted, it’s a sword, and Mammon is aware of it. There’s no way the authority could fail.”

Lapis nodded. Then, she picked up on something and asked, “Do you mean it fails if he isn’t fully aware of what he’s stealing?”

“Well, yeah. Let’s say he had your bra in mind when he used his authority on your robe. He couldn’t take it because he didn’t really know about it.”

“Your example is making me want to smack you.”

“Don’t do it! I don’t think I can stomach your attacks right now.”

With her pants stolen, Gula only had her own two hands to hide her exposed undergarments. If she was attacked, she would be sent toppling with her panties exposed, which she wanted to avoid if at all possible. She sounded quite serious.

“Putting that aside, that explanation leaves the possibility that Mr. Loren’s sword isn’t actually a sword.”

“Don’t be stupid. That’s clearly a sword.”

Gula didn’t need that spelled out to her. Lapis felt the same way.

However, looking at the facts of the matter, that was the most likely possibility. Therefore, the item that Loren continued swinging around was not actually a sword.

“Say what you want, but what else could it be?”

“I just grabbed it from the family storehouse. I don’t know the first thing

about its true nature.”

Officially, Loren had coincidentally stumbled upon the sword at a weapon shop in Kaffa, but there was a tacit understanding that Lapis had pulled some strings. Despite knowing this, Loren continued right on using it. If Lapis—the origin of the item—didn’t know what it was, then no one else possibly could.

“You didn’t get it looked at?”

“That costs money.”

Lapis could appraise items on her own to some extent, but she truly didn’t know anything about Loren’s greatsword. It was kept safe and sound in the back of the warehouse, and she thought it was a good weapon so she passed it to him. Perhaps she should have looked into it first.

Even as Lapis and Gula chatted away, Loren single-mindedly swung, making sure his attention didn’t drift away from Mammon. Now with added self-enhancement, his attacks were faster and more numerous, yet Mammon accurately parried each slash with only his hands.

“It’s useless, but you’re starting to get irritating, mister.”

“Looks like your power’s useless too!”

Loren returned provocation for provocation, and though Mammon had started it, the boy flew into a rage. *You really don’t know how to take a jab*, Loren thought with a sigh. Perhaps out of anger, Mammon allowed a slight gap in his defenses.

Loren unleashed a kick to take advantage of this. Mammon had been so focused on the unstealable blade that he took a boot right to the gut. He hadn’t suffered much damage from a rather serious demonic kick, so though Loren’s kick elicited a slight groan, it proved largely ineffective as well.

Still, if only for a moment, Loren had dealt enough damage to momentarily stun his enemy. This was his chance. Loren hammered home his blade.

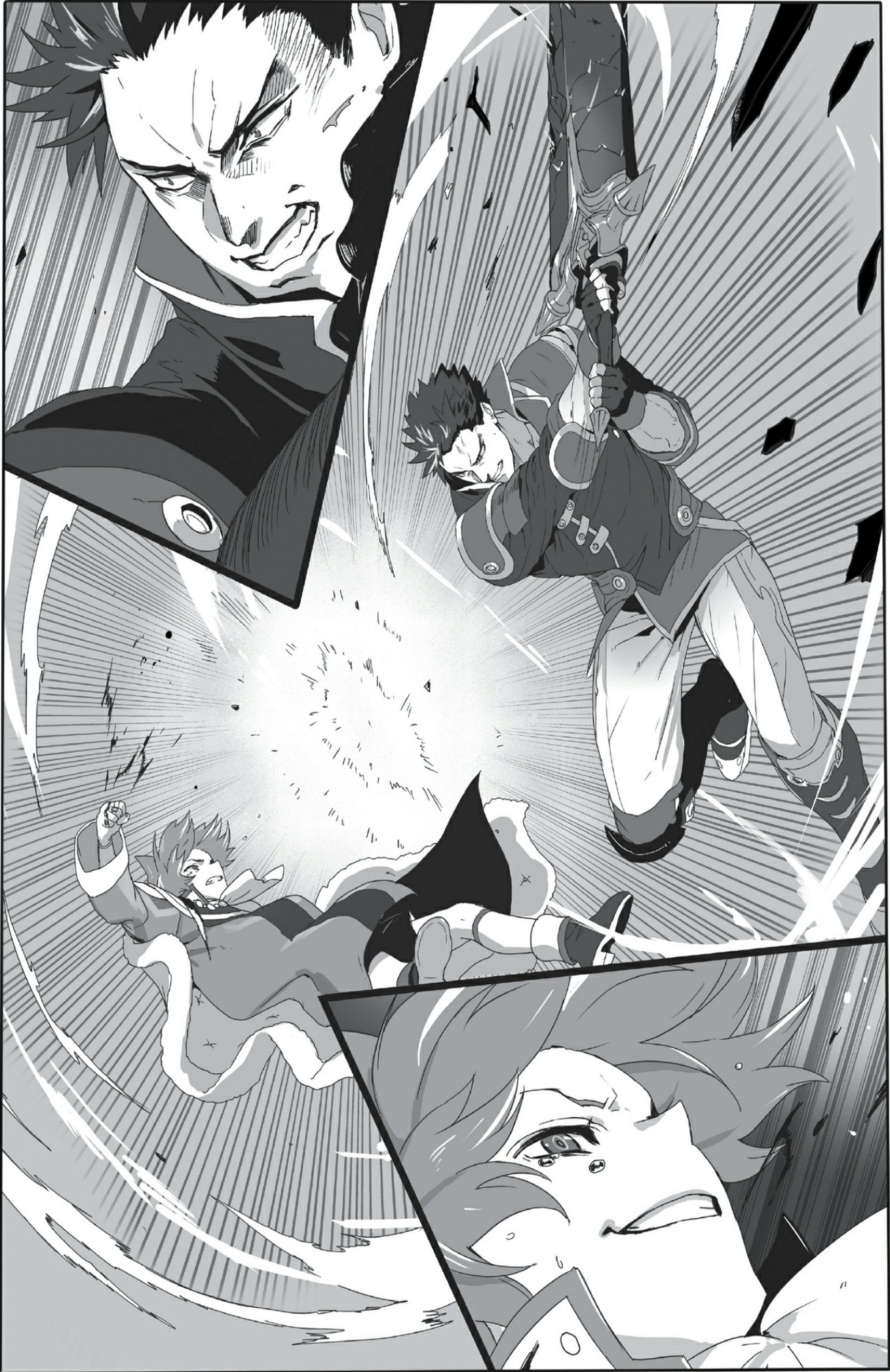
Too late to guard, Mammon took the sword to his shoulder. Yet its blade did not dig into his flesh. *His defense is too high*, Loren thought with a click of his tongue. Mammon, meanwhile, let out a pained cry at the first proper blow he’d

taken in the battle.

“Looks like it hurts if it hits!”

“You... Don’t underestimate me!”

Loren raised his sword to follow up on the first score. Mammon’s eyes darkened in rage. As Loren channeled all the strength in his body and aimed for the boy’s head, Mammon clenched his fist. He clenched it with so much power his hand shook as he thrust it at the lowering sword.



Fist met blade, and Loren and Mammon reeled back practically in tandem. At that moment, Loren heard an ominous cracking sound from the sword in his hands. He knew that his blade was worse off from the impact. He knew it wouldn't withstand many more blows, but he had no other means of attack.

As he retook his stance and unleashed another blow, Loren prayed the sword would hold out long enough to handle Mammon. A trickle of blood ran down Mammon's hand, and the boy teared up from the pain, but still, he clenched his fist and met the next strike.

Just as with the first, both combatants reeled back from the force. The only difference was that the wound on Mammon's fist was wider than it had been the first time. And, with a dull sound, Loren's greatsword crumbled.

Mammon cried at the pain as the black blade shattered into fragments, but he was convinced of his victory. He smiled. But even as Loren watched the fragments fall away, he planned his next move.

The weight in Loren's hands had hardly changed, even with so many pieces fallen away. Without even checking, Loren was convinced he still had enough blade left. He raised the faltering sword high for the third strike, and as Loren swung a blade that was crumbling to bits, Mammon's eyes went wide.

The falling blade gave off a white light. It collided with the arm Mammon had raised to defend himself.

Before the attack reached the boy's body, it bit deep into his left arm, and it continued to push until it reached his shoulder. As Mammon cried out, Loren knew this was the deciding moment.

With the sword still embedded in Mammon's flesh, he quickly let go of the handle, shoved a hand into his breast pocket, and pulled out a dagger with a red stone in its pommel.

"And another! Have a taste of this!"

Some force protected Mammon's body, but perhaps Loren could drive a weapon through a point he had already damaged. With his left hand, Loren grabbed Mammon's head and stabbed the dagger into his flank.

Suddenly, Loren felt an immense impact on his chest and leapt backward.

His ribs and sternum groaned and grated as he bounced several times across the floor, rolling along before finally coming to a stop. His eyes spun from the shock and his dizziness as he lifted himself up.

He raised his head to see the aftermath of his attack. There Mammon was with a dagger in his side, crying out shrilly as he writhed on the ground.

The sword in his shoulder had come unstuck from the impact and now lay beside him.

“Hurts, right? That one’s Painbringer. Savor the taste.”

Loren had used one of the enchanted weapons from the bandit keep, a dagger that amplified one’s sense of pain several times over. He had activated it on Mammon, who had been sliced and stabbed, and Mammon was now wracked by impossible levels of pain.

Mammon was a dark god, but perhaps his spirit was the same as his appearance. From Mammon’s words and actions, Loren surmised that his child spirit would be incredibly weak to pain. Apparently, his strategy was immediately effective.

But it wasn’t decisive, Loren thought. He crawled over and grabbed the hilt of his sword.

It was a sword with a black blade, but that blade had crumbled. Yet a sword was still there in place of what was lost: a white sword slimmer than the original but just as long. It had torn through the defenses of a dark god and inflicted damage, but Loren could ponder that fact later. He stood to snuff out Mammon’s last breath.

But what he saw next was a boy crying in pain, bleeding out from his side and shoulder. And Gula on her knees protecting him.

“I know I’m doing you wrong, but can you leave it at this? I’ll take responsibility and collect him later. Please at least leave him alive.”

“I don’t see anything in it for me.”

“Could you do it for me?”

She prostrated herself before him. Loren's expression was troubled as he looked at Mammon. The boy stared at him fearfully. He lifted his body through the pain, taking a page out of Gula's book and kneeling.

"I'm... I'm sorry."

Putting aside the dark god thing, he had the appearance of a young boy covered in blood. When he begged for forgiveness, Loren felt like a true villain. He lowered his sword.

He looked at Lapis and Tizona, wondering if they were all right with this. They were the ones who Mammon had slighted. Lapis nonchalantly shrugged. Tizona, wrapped in borrowed cloth, gave a nod.

The decision had been entrusted to Loren, and he looked down at the dark gods prostrated before him.

"Promise you'll disband the bandits and never show any hostility toward us again. Can you do that?"

"Understood..."

"And apologize to the girls you stripped. And let them hit you a few times. Okay?"

One person had been stripped naked, and the others stripped down to their undergarments. To Loren, a small punishment sounded like enough for forgiveness, and Mammon nodded a few times.

"The treasures you've gathered will be seized. To be honest, it makes sense to turn you in to the nation as the ringleader who caused this mess, but...I'll report that you got away."

Their objective had been the treasures sleeping in the ruins. Not the bandits, nor their leader. Everything was fine as long as Tizona obtained the treasure she was after. The rest was surplus and relatively inconsequential.

Had these been normal bandits, Loren would make sure they could never harm anyone again. But the bandit leader was a dark god, and Gula insisted she would take responsibility for him. Perhaps that was safest.

"If we turn him in, I can see the country falling apart. Or maybe using him for

nefarious purposes. That sounds like a real pain.”

“Sounds fine to me. We can smack him after his wounds have healed. He might die if we try it now,” Lapis proclaimed with a cold smile. She still held a grudge.

His eyes still teary, Mammon looked at her with the same fear he had shown Loren.

Epilogue:

Cleanup to Conclusion

THUS, THE STORY CLOSED on a massive bandit brigade that caused a ruckus in parts of the Waargenburg Kingdom—well, not exactly. The fault was with the report Loren issued to the adventurers' guild in Kaffa.

According to his report, the bandits were eradicated by a sudden onset of undead.

Though the party had fought a few bandits along the way, the other bandits were gone by the time the battle was over. They had either died or fled.

If this were a report from an adventurer who had been tasked with dealing with bandits, there would have been the issue of fulfilling that duty. Loren had gone solely to investigate the ruins, and the bandits were completely unscheduled.

In fact, Lapis managed to file a complaint about how no one had told them there would be a bandit stronghold right next to the ruins. She got an apology from the guild and a few bonus coins.

The ruins themselves were a disappointment. Loren and Lapis had a vague inkling of that from the moment they stepped into the entrance hall. The building had been a villa for some rich folk or nobles from the ancient kingdom.

Perhaps something had happened long ago, and now only the central building remained.

In short, it was a structure that rarely saw any use; any items left within were not particularly valuable. Any worthwhile loot had been extracted by bandit hands, either turned to cash or left sleeping in their storehouses.

The enchanted equipment they found had been a part of that plunder.

If that was the end of it, then Tizona wouldn't have been able to pay the required fee, and she would have been indentured to some noble. However, though the bandits were unscheduled, the party had still managed to obtain the

vast fortune the criminals amassed.

What the bandits had kept from their previous escapades had grown to a considerable stash. Everything they had snatched from the surrounding countryside, all kept in the ruins used by their leader. While the country took a portion for the residents that the bandits had tormented, most of it remained with the party.

“Though it doesn’t matter how much remains. It’s all Tizona’s.”

“Are you sure? I’m not sure if I should be saying this, but you helped me out quite a bit. And...”

“We’re not gonna get sold if we’re broke. You’re a different story. If you don’t want that, then take everything apart from our payment.”

“I’m sorry. I’m in your debt. And, err... About what I saw there...”

Tizona struggled to find the right words as Loren scratched his head. On top of a battle between dark gods, she had witnessed Lapis kicking one of them. On top of *this*, she had seen Loren defeat the embodiment of Greed. She had borne witness to all of it.

It was pushing it to tell her to wave it all away without a single question. But that didn’t mean they could sincerely explain everything to her.

As Loren wondered what he should do, Tizona said, “I see you don’t want me to know. Then I saw nothing. I swear it on my honor as a mercenary. As long as you don’t want me to speak, I promise to take it to the grave.”

“Thanks for that, but...you sure?”

“To be perfectly honest with you, I’m not sure what I’d do even if I did know. It would be far easier and less stressful to pretend I didn’t see anything.”

“That’s a smart way to look at it.”

He didn’t know how much he should take her at her word. Still, the real story would sound so nonsensical he didn’t think anyone would believe it. Thus, he managed to part with Tizona without having to shake her down for her silence.

Feeling indebted, she also promised to lend her strength if they ever needed it, but she was a mercenary who was always moving from place to place. There

were hardly any reliable ways of contacting her, so Loren didn't count on it.

Like that, another adventure came to a close. The country remained in fear that the bandits who fled would come together again and so the army was putting together a team to pursue them. The kingdom would chase a foe that had been wiped off the map.

They would never find any bandits, but Loren had no obligation to tell them that. As far as Loren was concerned, they would give up eventually.

There were a few more depots besides the one they had crushed, and Lapis thought that the country's efforts weren't completely in vain.

"More importantly, you're serious about leaving Mammon with you, right?"

Having a child's mind with a dark god's powers, Mammon was an incredible nuisance. Gula had taken charge and transported him somewhere that Loren and Lapis didn't know about, and Loren thought it would be a problem if he was left to his own devices.

Gula meekly nodded. "At the very least, he won't be up to no good where we can't see him."

"Sounds like he'll be doing no good in plain sight, then."

"Don't worry, I told Lust to watch him."

Loren imagined the dark god of lust watching over the dark god of greed and immediately drove the sight from his head. That sounded downright criminal. Age-wise, they were both older than a human could fathom, and perhaps they shouldn't be judged by human standards. Perhaps thinking about it that way would be easier on his mind, and he pondered the matter no longer.

"What are you trying to do, gathering up all those dark gods? And wait, why are they reviving all over the place?"

"How should I know? Either the seals are loosening, or someone's intentionally undoing them. Mammon didn't know either. As for the reason I'm gathering them? That's easy. We can't let them run free."

Gula's argument did have some merits. There was no telling how much damage dark gods would cause if left free, and there were no normal people

who could manage them. With that in mind, having a dark god like Gula babysit the others was a life-saver, and there was no reason to stop her.

“How many of you are there?”

“Let’s see, I picked up Sloth, Lust, and Greed. Then there’s me, Gluttony, so there are three left. Envy, Pride, and Wrath.”

“They all sound terrible to meet. Why are they all popping up around Waargenburg anyways?”

“Well, that’s because the ancient kingdom’s capital was somewhere around here. They should all be nearby, as long as someone didn’t carry one off.”

Hardly anyone even knew the name of the ancient kingdom, and there were no records remaining of where their cities had been. Their capital was a complete mystery, and as far as the scholars knew, it could have been anywhere on the continent.

“Do you know the specific location?” Lapis asked.

“The landscape has changed a good bit, so I can’t say for sure. I could tell you the general area, though.”

“If we excavate it, we might find something outrageous.”

“If we’re talkin’ about outrageous things, how about what Loren’s got?”

Gula pointed at the cloth-covered greatsword hanging from Loren’s back. During the battle with Mammon, the crumbled black blade had revealed a pure white sword within it. Seeing as it was able to tear through a dark god’s defenses and wound his body, it was most certainly a weapon imbued with incredible magic, but its identity was still a mystery.

Its sharpness eluded common sense, and if accidentally dropped tip-first, it would stab straight into stone flooring. Should any extra force be applied, it would sink through its target all the way to the hilt.

Mysteriously, its sharpness seemed to subside when properly wrapped in cloth. Surely when it sliced through everything, it should have cut straight through its wrappings, but it seemed to be safe. Loren found this out when he tried hanging it on his back. Otherwise, it would have been too dangerous to

carry around.

“That’s not an edge a greatsword should have.”

“I agree. I reckon it was so dangerous, they purposely wrapped it in magium to conceal it.”

“The dark god of greed’s authority presumably didn’t work because he was targeting the magium sheath. He believed the sheath was a sword, so the authority failed.”

“So you’re saying I’ve been fighting with a sheath this whole time? I’ve never heard of a sheath with a cutting edge.”

“They must have really wanted to hide it.”

I’d have never guessed if the ‘sheath’ didn’t break, thought Loren.

According to Lapis, all the spell sequences on the magium portion were probably there to conceal what was inside. Though she had no way to be sure now that it had fallen to bits.

“It must have cost a fortune,” said Lapis.

“You sure you should have given it to me, then?”

Simply having a magium blade already made it incredibly rare. If it was actually so valuable that it used magium to conceal itself, then he didn’t know if he should be holding it.

Lapis looked at him blankly. “What could you be referring to? Didn’t you find that in a shop?”

“Yeah, forget about that for now. You’re just about the only one who might know anything about this thing.”

“Are you relying on me?”

There was a sparkle in her eyes, and for a moment Loren wondered how he should respond. He ultimately decided to say exactly what was on his mind.

“Relying on you? I always rely on you,” he said, patting her head.

“That’s good to know.” She looked tickled by the head pat, and her smile made it clear her words were no lie.

“I’ve been relying on you a lot too, for, you know...money... Ah, no it’s nothing.” Gula added a word too many and got the exact opposite look: a stare as cold as ice.

Gazing absentmindedly at the two of them, Loren stuck a hand into his pants pocket and fiddled around with the two gold coins he had received from Tizona. *This time was a decent success*, he thought to himself.

Bonus Story:

From the Notes of a Certain Priest

RECENTLY, I met up with an acquaintance who ventured forth into the world before I did. They told me they get pitying eyes whenever they claim to be a priest to the god of knowledge and asked me if I knew anything about that.

I do happen to be a priest to the god of knowledge, but what of it?

For the time being, I answered that I had no idea. Perhaps there's someone out there insulting our god Kuhklu's good name.

Now then, our job this time began with registering Ms. Gula with the adventurers' guild. It sounded like a bad joke for a dark god to enlist as a lowly adventurer, but this was necessary for her to operate in human territory.

Rather, if Ms. Gula didn't work, the food expenses alone would bore a hole through Mr. Loren's wallet.

As expected of a dark god, she caused a ruckus just by registering.

There was a time when Mr. Loren delivered a harsh beating to a few adventurers trying to pick a fight, so the quick-witted ones tried not to get involved with him. However, there are positives and negatives to getting your name out there.

In any case, I thought there would be blood raining in the guild again when a lone woman entered the scene. How to put it? She was a flashy, bright red person.

Perhaps they thought she would be easier to deal with than Mr. Loren, so the adventurers turned their anger to her instead, and suddenly, it happened. Someone burned to ash without the flames touching anything around him. It was quite an impactful scene.

Apparently, that woman was the famous Infernal Edge.

She seemed to know Mr. Loren, but Mr. Loren stubbornly denied being the Cleaving Gale. I began to feel it was impossible to get him to recognize it, but judging by the Infernal Edge—Ms. Tizona's—reactions, he was definitely the Cleaving Gale.

I knew he had to be an incredible mercenary. Though I think it would be fine if he accepted it a bit, I highly doubt he will, given his personality.

Now then, onto Ms. Tizona. She was apparently an incredible mercenary who came to the guild with a job.

I thought that had nothing to do with us. But the next day, when we were looking for a job to pay for Ms. Gula's food expenses, we were suddenly accosted by guild staff.

We had been personally nominated for Ms. Tizona's job.

Although they said it was because she and Loren were both mercenaries, I couldn't shake the thought that it was because no other adventurer would accept her quest after she had reduced several adventurers to ash. Let's just not think about it.

As for the job itself, I got the feeling that, despite being an undoubtedly incredible mercenary, Ms. Tizona was quite hopeless.

To wit, Ms. Tizona had burned the troops of her client alongside the enemy and was being pressed to pay reparations. Either her company would be dismantled, or Ms. Tizona would be sold into service, so she intended to search some untouched ruins she had spotted to pay her debts with whatever she found there. She wanted our assistance.

I do think Ms. Tizona has an incredible gift if it made such wanton destruction possible, but it is quite unfortunate that her ability can't distinguish between friend and foe, and she used it regardless. When it comes to gift-holders, Claes comes to mind. Perhaps gifts only go to hopeless people.

Putting Ms. Tizona's hopelessness aside for the time being, we decided to accept the job and accompany her to the ruins.

Along the way we were attacked by bandits—but that's like the spice of a journey. They can be a bit troublesome when they jump out at you, but it feels

like a rather lonely road when they don't.

No one complains if you beat them, and once you defeat them, you get to keep everything they have. They are wonderful people. I pray that each nation only takes half-hearted measures so bandits persist to line our pockets. However, the town we stopped in did not have such an optimistic outlook.

We heard rumors of a large-scale bandit organization, and suddenly, those bandits were attacking the town.

Bandits only have that charm to them when they're sneakily attacking travelers. If they suddenly attack a town head-on, then charm be damned. I definitely think it's the army's job to deal with them, but this bandit organization was not generous enough to raise our hopes of this.

After we fought off the bandits, Mr. Loren and I offered what information we gleaned to the town.

It has occurred to me that I might be doing too much work.

All those heroine roles from the heroic tales I hear on the streets have the heroine smiling by the protagonist's side. Sometimes they're kidnapped, and sometimes they bring the audience to tears by putting their heart or chest or whatever it is on display.

It's not like I particularly want to do that. I don't know if I'm the heroine or not, and I don't know if Mr. Loren's is a heroic tale.

That aside, the town asked us if we could do something about one of the bandit depots. Ms. Tizona agreed, so we went along. But now that I think about it, asking a handful of adventurers to take care of a bandit stronghold is a bit much, isn't it?

Perhaps that was simply how desperate the townsfolk were, but who in their right mind would take that job?

In our case, our forces were essentially overkill, so it was within our capabilities. If any other adventurer took the job, then the positions of hunter and prey would be reversed. All you good boys and girls shouldn't imitate what you see.

There was nothing of particular note to write about the attack on the depot. Ms. Tizona could have probably handled it alone. The problem was the information we got there—that the large-scale bandit organization had settled at the same location Ms. Tizona said the ruins were.

I'd heard a few stories about monsters making a nest in ruins, but I didn't think bandits would make a home there.

Granted, both bandits and monsters are nothing but trouble to normal people. They both pile up assets; they can both be hunted down, and you'll be thanked for it. And no one complains when you kill them, so I guess they're pretty similar.

Even if there was a bandit stronghold, we still had to complete Tizona's original quest, so we got a bit of help from the townsfolk and headed over. There, we found a splendidly fortified stronghold.

It was nothing but trouble adding to trouble, but the god of knowledge once said, "Trouble is no trouble if you have the power to chokeslam it."

That is not a joke. I am a priest, and I guarantee it. Although you might not find it in the scriptures.

With that said, we had Ms. Tizona act independently as we attacked from the front. Against multiple weak foes, the powers of a Lifeless King really shone. Ms. Scena can produce low-grade undead without limit, so those she attacks are really in for the fight of their life.

What's more, the longer the battle goes on, the further the damages spread, the more undead there will be... I get the feeling that as he is now, Mr. Loren is actually more threatening than Ms. Tizona. Though small, he produced a bone dragon. I'm beginning to think a national army would be needed to hunt him down.

Not that I have any pity for the bandits subjected to it.

They fell apart all too easily. We slipped through their ranks and reached the ruins, but there something curious happened.

Ms. Tizona had gone ahead of us, and she had used a different entrance, presumably because the main one wouldn't open. Yet, those hefty doors swung

open at Mr. Loren's touch.

I can't disregard the possibility they were open from the start and Ms. Tizona simply misunderstood, but it is quite strange that Loren could effortlessly move those heavy things.

No, I understand that Mr. Loren's physical prowess is abnormal. But perhaps I should jot this down somewhere in my heart.

In any case, the ruins doors opened to a scene that was not very ruinous. After the fact, I found out that while they were undoubtedly ruins, they had most likely been used as a villa by some noble.

As I felt let down, I suddenly heard Ms. Tizona's scream. We ran toward her, and for some reason found her naked.

Sure, she is a mercenary, but Ms. Tizona is still a woman. Mr. Loren offered his cloth as he couldn't leave her be. He properly looked away as I covered her up—Mr. Loren really is a gentleman, you know. That is something I must mention.

In fact, I would go as far as to say that Ms. Tizona is quite beautiful, and a normal person would have stared at her. I must emphasize that Mr. Loren's reaction was quite favorable.

The one who did that to Ms. Tizona was, of all people, the dark god Mammon, who ruled over Greed...a child.

Though he did seem to have lived through the years, he was undoubtedly a child both inside and out. In a sense, perhaps he was the perfect representation of greed.

And of course, the dark god did not obediently submit, and Mr. Loren had to fight him. But the dark god's authority was truly unpleasant.

He could steal any item he designated, no questions asked. He took my bra and he took Ms. Gula's pants.

Although he tried to steal Mr. Loren's greatsword, for some reason his authority fizzled. Still, he stubbornly kept trying to use it, and that was Mr. Loren's chance to attack. Mr. Loren's sword couldn't withstand the exchange

and fell apart, only to reveal another greatsword inside of it.

I guess that's how it was constructed.

It's not like I know where that sword came from.

The blade managed to reach Mr. Mammon's body, and after he was stabbed with a pain-amplifying dagger, Mr. Mammon threw in the towel.

I thought that was the end of it, but Ms. Gula begged us to leave him with her, and we did so.

The ruins were far poorer than we had hoped. Ms. Tizona would have been sold off at that rate, but after surrendering the stolen funds recovered from the bandits to her, we scraped by. And we all lived happily ever after.

Rather than the payment and the fulfillment of a job well done, I felt more rewarded by Mr. Loren telling me he was "relying" on me.

Next, we... No, before that, I really must look into that greatsword of unknown origin. I have to get in touch with my family, so that will be all for today.



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